School consolidation: A qualitative case study on the importance of identity in a rural environment

Sue Ellen Burrack

Iowa State University

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School consolidation: A qualitative case study on the importance of identity in a rural environment

by

Sue Burrack

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Constance C. Beecher, Co-major Professor
Robert Reason, Co-major Professor
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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my heart and soul also known as my two grandsons, Axel Rhodes Burrack and Callym Quinn Burrack. Grandma now has more time to play!
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And, most importantly, to my son Cole and my daughter-in-love Kara, my grandsons Axel and Callym, and my wonderful and patient husband David. This endeavor is dedicated to each of you. You believed I could do this and you wanted this for me. This dissertation has been an epic wandering with many crossroads. We have lived, loved, laughed and persevered. I now hope I can get back to spending more time with each of you.
Though school district consolidation in the United States has been occurring from the early part of the 20th Century to present times, there is still much to be discovered on the best way to approach school consolidation and, specifically, approach the shifting social and cultural identity involved during the school consolidation process. Most of the focus of the body of literature concerning the effects of school consolidation has been on efficiency and financial issues inherent in making the decision to consolidate. This study provided a better understanding on behavioral, cognitive, and affective components involved in social capital and school identity and the importance of these factors within school consolidation consideration.

Social capital involves the connections and sense of belonging within a community or group that result from similar demographic attitudes and characteristics within the rural environment. This can be realized through affiliation with a school and the identification with the environment which is partially created through shared meanings, shared symbols, and sayings of the school. This institutional and educational culture can occur without awareness and over time from the affective, behavioral and cognitive ties among the people and their sociophysical environment. A changing school identity may influence the social capital, local economy, and community identity. The emphasis of the study was on how identity within a rural environment played a role in school consolidation consideration and the implications of a potentially changing school identity.

This research used a case study design with interviews conducted with selected stakeholders of the rural school districts involved in the case study. Case study was used for the research since case study allowed the researcher to seek out and conceptualize the ideas that emerged through interviews, observation, personal histories, and archival documents. This study focused on the perceptions of a school superintendent, a school board president, alumni students, and community
members in the area of identity of the individuals and the school within the rural environment. There were a total of six participants and each was involved in two interviews. By using case study, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the concerned phenomena in a “real-life” setting.

Significant changes can occur as school consolidation is considered. A likely byproduct of impending change is disruption and discussion. How do stakeholders in the school consolidation process describe their experiences? How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders? What were the concerns about identity posed by various stakeholders from the perspective of the superintendent of the school district, school board president, students at the time of the consolidation, and selected members of the community and how were these concerns addressed?

Utilizing an interpretive theoretical perspective, this qualitative case study applied Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development as a method to ground the study and develop the evidence base for the role of place attachment in social-ecological dynamics. Bronfenbrenner’s Theory gave attention to different social and cultural contexts and allowed examination of place attachment and how people and cultures relate to their environments. The emphasis on the interaction with social-ecological change was used to support and focus the approach and allowed me to remove subjectivity as much as possible in the analysis. I could focus exclusively on participant perspectives and explore the affective, behavioral and social factors involved in the consideration of consolidation of a rural school district. Meanings emerged through the research process. The several strands of evidence related to the experience of rural school consolidation were synthesized to enable me to state the major research findings and offer recommendations on the findings.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

*Kurt Vonnegut once argued that no one really dies, because someplace in time that person is still around, it’s just in your “now” that they are gone. I love that theory and, as more time passes, I find it strangely comforting. So maybe, for us who are losing our school and part of our identity, we should think of it that way. We are still Vikings, just not in the “now.”*

*Southard, 2012, para. 21*

Despite the potential for negative reaction and challenges, school consolidation has been an off-again, on-again issue nationwide since the 1920s, when transportation methods developed to the point that movement of students could cover a wider area than what had been possible by walking or by horseback. A broad term describing the combining of districts or schools to form a larger school, consolidation is sometimes called reorganization or merger (Peshkin, 1978). Given the long history, school consolidation has fallen in and out of favor as educational reform and there have been many attempts to settle the question of school consolidation.

There are multiple issues connected with school consolidation. The voluminous literature on the consideration and process of school consolidation has focused on four key issues: cost savings, efficiency, educational quality and human resources. When state revenues fall and there is an economic crisis, school consolidation is considered as a way to reduce costs and increase uniformity (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie, 2011). Rural schools in America are particularly affected by economics-based talks of consolidation because dwindling rural populations reduce availability of resources (Howley, Howley, Hendrickson, Belcher, and Howley, 2012). School consolidation is often also considered as part of an effort to create efficiencies in school operations (Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel, 2010). Economic and efficiency factors applied to rural schools are consistent with the conclusions of Strange (2011) regarding educational quality and
opportunities. The logic is that larger, merged districts will save taxpayers’ dollars and offer
students a higher-quality education. Human resources are also considered in the consolidation
conversation in that there are a variety of people including professional educators, lawmakers,
and non-school connected taxpayers who think rural schools are unprofessionally run and
“dominated by localism and backwardness” (Strange, 2011, p. 11). Although preserving
resources and increasing the quality of education are worthy goals, in the rural Midwest and
other regions of the United States, school consolidation continues to spark controversy
(Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011).

**Historical Perspective of School Consolidation**

School consolidation has been a topic of discussion for over 100 years and one that
continues to challenge rural schools (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Whenever critical
examination of rural education has occurred in the United States, school consolidation has been
advanced as a means of improving educational opportunity in a more cost effective way
(Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). Since 2000, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Montana,
Nebraska, South Dakota and Virginia have all enacted policies related to district consolidation,
according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. News reports suggest that Maine,
Illinois and Iowa are also places where consolidation remains an issue (Russo, 2006).

It is a basic understanding of modern educational theory that students should be offered
as consistent and as broad of a course of educational offerings as possible and that these
offerings may be best achieved by schools with a larger student population (Bard, Gardener, &
Wieland, 2006). A consolidated school has been often promoted as a place that could offer an
expanded curriculum and increased opportunities while minimizing expense (DeYoung, 1995).
According to Coulson (2007), the factors involved in minimizing expense include reducing
decision-making rights and local control from school boards of small districts and saving money to reduce the burden of property taxes.

The consolidation of rural schools throughout the United States, however, has been an often-debated and sometimes contentious topic for lawmakers, policy-makers, school administrators and rural community members (Llopis-Jepsen, 2015). Part of the controversy stems from the major role schools have played in the life of rural communities since the 1800s (DeYoung, 1995; Theobald, 1997). As families gathered within the rural areas to create communities, there arose a need for the community leaders and families to decide how to educate the children of the rural community. School districts were created by the groups of rural families who shared similar ideas about needing a school for the education of their large groups of children (Tyack, 1974).

One-room School Buildings

The early schools looked very different from the present schools. Public education was, to a great extent, composed of one-room school buildings with no age-specific grades (Theobald, 1995). The one-room building with students of varying ages was often filled to capacity and, when capacity exceeded the size of the building, another school was often built to provide for the area families. The schools operated on schedules that adapted to the lifestyle of the American farm family, allowing students to be absent from school for extended periods of time to participate in agricultural work and assist their families (Tyack, 1974).

President Theodore Roosevelt, in 1908, formed the National Commission on Country Life with the mission to address rural problems, including what was perceived as the rural school problem (Theobald, 1995). In what became known as the Country Life Movement, which began as a way to encourage consolidation of small, inefficient country schools, there was an attempt to improve the standard of living for rural people primarily through various educational initiatives.
(Theobald, 1995). People who were advocates of the Movement were known as country lifers (Theobald, 1995), and sought to lower costs and ensure that students had access to qualified teachers and specialized facilities, while still maintaining an appreciation for the country lifestyle.

As farming became more mechanized and urbanization increased, the need was decreased for child labor. Also, there was a decline in rural birth rates (Johnson & Beale, 1998). These factors led to a reduction in the number of one-room schools that were prevalent across the American rural landscape (Theobald, 1995). The diminishing number of one-room schools continued as improvements were made in transportation and roads and there were increasing demands for more advanced instruction in mathematics and the sciences (Theobald & Wood, 2010). School consolidation grew increasingly more attractive and possible. The country schoolhouses began to empty out and consolidated schools in the rural areas grew (Johnson & Beale, 1998).

The goal to provide a better education for students was the seed to growth of school consolidation. With school consolidation, the rural patrons found the role they had played in the school was also changing. In the past, the rural patrons had decision-making power and they believed the school was theirs to control, whatever the problems or issues. Now the school was no longer the one-room school building but a building within town limits with a school board and administrators and multiple teachers (Tyack, 1974). The ideas and desires of the rural families were sometimes in conflict with policy makers and education officials (Tyack, 1974). Families were also sometimes in conflict with other families as they tried to reach agreement on the best ways to manage complex school issues such as facilities and their upkeep, curriculum
offerings and changes, transportation issues, technology advancements, and class size (Strange, 2011).

**Cubberley and Education Reform**

Some education reformers viewed this idea of moving from the one-room schools to school consolidation still lacking in many areas. One-room country schools were disappearing but this was not viewed by education reformers as a remedy to the problems in rural education. Consolidation of schools was thought to provide students a more thorough education by eliminating small schools in favor of large ones, but this was not always the result (Bard). Reformers such as Stanford University professor Ellwood Cubberley decried the inefficient, unprofessional, and “backward” practices of small community schools (Gulliford, 1996). Gulliford (1996) wrote about Cubberley attacking the inadequacy of rural schools. Cubberley postulated that compared with a good town or city school, the school in the more rural environment was poor, had numerous classes and overburdened programs, lacked equipment and ideas, and was unable to change. Cubberley felt not even the best of teachers could make headway and he proposed increased centralization and consolidation as remedies. Cubberley saw consolidation as the way to refocus and revitalize rural schools and have a system better adapted to the needs of rural people (Gulliford, 1996).

**Increased Access**

In response to Cubberley’s ideas, education reformers spoke more fervently that the curricular offerings of small rural schools were inadequate to meet the demands of the modern age (Gulliford, 1996). It was decried that small rural schools were a waste of resources and a feeble means for educating growing generations of citizenry though there were virtually no research studies nor substantiating, objective data whatsoever for these claims. However, the voices of the education reformers were noted and the movement continued to structure schools in
much the same way as America was structuring its factories (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006). Educational reform for most of the twentieth century’s second half focused on expanding access to education and increasing standardization of schools regarding buildings, equipment, professional qualifications of staff, administrative procedures, and regulations while also working to reduce costs (DeYoung & Howley, 1992).

**Conant and Cost-effective Schools**

In the late 1950s, James Bryant Conant, the then-President of Harvard University, conducted a study for the Carnegie Corporation of the comprehensive American high school. In 1959, Conant, wrote *The American High School Today* which called for high schools with fewer than one hundred students per graduating class to meet curricular needs. Conant (1959) wrote that he felt small high schools could be satisfactory only at exorbitant expense and that the highest concentration of efforts should be on district reorganization as a way to eliminate the small high schools. Conant (1959) further advanced the elimination of small high schools would result in increased cost-effectiveness and greater curricular offerings.

Since the late 1980s, continuous improvement has become a central issue for American organizations of all sizes and types. Its hallmarks are proven ingredients for maximum efficiency and effectiveness including time management, effective leadership, benchmarking, and systems analysis (Kouzes and Posner, 2017). The goal within school consolidation is to make sure the right resources are in the right places at the right times to maximize sharing between districts and improve instructional implementation and intervention. Despite the efforts of the years of accumulated research and investigation, school consolidation still remains an issue of discussion and concern for rural areas and a topic of debate by state policy makers and reformers.
Dwindling Rural Population

Population loss within the rural areas, especially of young adults, is a major factor in the school consolidation movement. Though the 2010 U.S. Census reported the overall U.S. population was growing by about 0.8 percent each year, rural America is losing population for the first time ever (Thorn, 2013). According to the U.S. Census, about 46.2 million people, or 15 percent of the U.S. population, resided in rural counties. This rural population was spread across 72 percent of the nation's land area (Thorn, 2013). The changes in population have been associated with sharp declines in U.S. birth rates and an aging population (Thorn, 2013).

This decline in rural population was in part due to dwindling populations in farming, especially in the Midwest, and the movement of young people to cities. This movement from rural areas began with industrialization within the cities and the subsequent creation of opportunities for jobs and ways to make a living (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). Also, the population of rural counties has been negatively affected by the waning desire of baby boomers to move to more remote locations for retirement and recreation. Census estimates, as of July 2012, revealed that would-be retirees are opting to stay put in urban areas near jobs and accessible health care (Thorn, 2013). Furthermore, as the economy has weakened, boomers had less savings to buy a vacation home which had the potential to become a full-time residence after retirement (Thorn, 2013).

The loss in population within rural areas was partially related to the farm economy and the aging farmer. According to the USDA report within the 2010 U.S. Census, twice as many U.S. farmers were over age 70 than there were under 30. For every farmer under age 30, there were six over age 60. This aging farming population has implications for the future ownership of U.S. farmland. It was predicted about 70 percent of all U.S. farmland will change hands in the next 10 years (USDA, 2010).
According to U.S. migration and growth data, older Americans are likely to live in rural areas until about age 74. The 74-year-old or older Americans may then move closer to more populated locations which still may be defined as rural but offer some of the amenities desired by the older Americans (Thorn, 2013). This information about shifts in population becomes more relevant when coupled with the fact that the oldest of the nation's 76 million boomers turn 74 in 2020, meaning the opportunity is fading for rural areas to retain their current population (Thorn, 2013). This senior citizen movement away from rural areas contributes significantly to the dilemma of reduced rural population and increases population within the urban communities.

Jason Henderson, associate dean of the Purdue University College of Agriculture and a former vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, said the movement of baby boomers from rural areas is key to rural growth and migration. Henderson proposed that many baby boomers have been delaying retirement which means there is a chance there could be elevated shifts in population as the baby boomers decide to make a transition in their place of residence. Also, Henderson anticipated that some baby boomers will decide the time for moving back to the rural areas has passed and the recession has caused some to make new decisions in where to have affordable living (Thorn, 2013).

Declining Number of School Districts

One-room school districts across the United States numbered more than 200,000 by 1910 (Fischel, 2010). This number of one-room school districts reduced to approximately 150,000 in the early thirties, and then to 117,000 by the mid-fifties (Koziol, Arthur, Hawley, Bovaird, Bash, McCormick & Welch, 2015). The decline in the number of one-room schools continued as the schools were slowly morphing into larger school districts covering a wider geographic area. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2000), there were approximately 18,000 one-room school districts in 1970 and one-room school districts within the United States
were virtually eliminated by the mid-seventies (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). This decline in the one-room schools was the result of consolidation of rural one-room schools into large-area districts (Fischel, 2010). The larger-area districts have also seen change as the districts have grown larger in geographic area and further consolidation has resulted which has led to a steady decline in the number of school districts across the nation (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011).

Table 1.1 Decline in number of school districts nationwide, 1931-1982

(Heinz, 2005, p. 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of school districts</th>
<th>Decline (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>127,531</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-42</td>
<td>115,493</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-52</td>
<td>71,094</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-62</td>
<td>35,676</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-72</td>
<td>17,995</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>15,912</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of independent school districts has drastically decreased and in 2016 there were 14,000 school districts in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Nationally, the school district count has decreased by 90 percent since the late 1930s (Iowa Policy Research Organization, 2010). These school districts of today look very different from the one-teacher school buildings of the past. School districts of today have multiple buildings, athletic complexes, and technology throughout the classrooms and offices. These changes also brought about an increase in the per pupil cost of educating students. Public schools within the United States were spending almost ten times as much per student as they had spent in 1920 even after adjusting for inflation (Bolkan, 2013). Therefore, efficiency has become an increasing concern and school consolidation has been considered as one of the solutions.

This reduction in school districts and one-teacher schools has affected some states more than others. For example, as of the 2012-2013 school year, there were 249 school districts in
Nebraska which was about half of what existed a decade ago (Llopis-Jepsen, 2015). In West Virginia, over 300 schools have been closed since 1990 (Eyre & Finn, 2002). Within Iowa, according to Stegmeir (2014), the 2014-2015 academic year in Iowa began with 338 school districts. This number represents a decrease from the 367 districts Iowa had in 2004 and represents an even more significant decrease from the 430 school districts in 1990. In 1953, there were 4,588 school districts in Iowa (Duffy, 2017).

Though rural school districts continue to be under scrutiny as to their academic and economic effectiveness, the largest percentage of public schools are in rural areas. The Condition of Education 2011 study found that 32 percent of public schools were in rural areas followed by suburbs (28 percent), cities (26 percent), and towns (14 percent).

**Potential for Increased Number of School Consolidations**

Many states including Iowa have supported the consolidation of rural schools and districts (Eyre & Finn, 2002; Self, 2001; Steifel, Homan & Foldesy, 1992). Reasons that have typically been used to encourage closing and consolidating schools include the need to spend limited and often-times decreasing state educational funds economically and the need to see that all students have access to varied and quality curricular offerings (Haller & Monk, 1992).

For many rural communities, population loss coupled with the reduced fiscal capacity to provide resources that meet required state and federal standards leads to consideration of school district consolidation (Strange, 2011). The Iowa Legislature passed a law in 1953 to encourage the reorganization of school districts which began a push for increased school consolidations across the state. The increase in school consolidations continued when lawmakers in 1965 passed legislation requiring all areas to be part of a legally constituted school district with a high school (Duffy, 2017).
The state school-funding systems often use fiscal incentives to induce consolidation (Howley, Howley, Hendrickson, Belcher, and Howley, 2012). Iowa offered financial incentives designed to encourage school districts to share programs, faculty and staff, and facilities. These fiscal incentives also encouraged consistent practices among school districts such as similar calendars which will result in opportunities to have shared resources (Sullivan, 2000).

Iowa is likely to see another round of school district consolidation in the years ahead due to dwindling rural populations and the expiration of a state provision that allows districts with declining enrollment to recoup budget losses, state educators say (Stegmeir, 2014). Socioeconomic factors can also affect school consolidation issues since nearly one in five children in America live in poverty (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2018). In addition, according to the U.S Census (2017), the economic gap among age groups is wide with the average American household steered by a person 65 years of age or older who has a net worth 47 times greater than a household headed by someone under 35 years old. According to Emily Piper, lobbyist for the Iowa Association of School Boards, closing a school district has been rare and consolidation and whole-grade sharing with rural schools has been a trend (DeYoung, 2018).

Although there is not a specific enrollment criteria that indicates consolidation needs to be considered, Imerman and Otto (2003) recommended that school districts should not fall below an enrollment of 750 students. Augenblick, Myers, and Silverstein (2001) proposed that if a school was to have an appropriate curriculum, a safe and nurturing environment, and extracurricular activities, a district should have an enrollment between 260 and 2,925 students. Howley and Bickel (2001) posited that the lower the socioeconomic status of the students and district, then the school enrollment should be small.
It has become increasingly more difficult for school districts to remain financially solvent as well as meet federal and state requirements (Sullivan, 2000). School consolidation can be a solution to ongoing financial challenges and difficulty in having qualified human resources to meet requirements. School districts are sometimes encouraged to consider consolidation as a means to continue to meet the needs of students. Researchers have identified various factors that should be considered as school districts consider consolidation as a way to improve efficiency and offer educational opportunities to students. Included among these factors are student safety and reasonable travel time, compatibility with neighboring schools, planning with county and state systems to achieve the most effective and efficient instructional delivery system, curriculum enhancement and quality, and future space and facilities for projected student enrollments (Purdy, 1997).

To help with navigating the issue of school consolidation, strategies have been developed to allow for some local and state control (Barker, 1986). Individual states provide guidance on school consolidation and some states have provided financial incentives to consolidate facilities and human resources. For example, the Iowa Department of Education provides a “District Reorganization, Dissolution, and Sharing Guide” to provide guidance to members of school boards, citizens, superintendents, area education agency administrators and board members, and other parties interested in school district whole grade sharing, reorganization, dissolution, and boundary changes (Iowa Dept. of Education, 2015).

**School Reorganization**

Although there has been an ebb and flow to the intensity of the school consolidation process, it has been relentless. The rural school districts in particular have been under pressure based on three factors: declining enrollment which leads to increased per pupil cost, fiscal distress and budget cuts in state government, and disparities in the economic fortunes of the rural
versus urban areas. Table 1.2 gives the number of school reorganizations in Iowa from 1966 to 2015.

Table 1.2 School reorganizations in Iowa
(Iowa Department of Education, 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years (in 5-yr. increments)</th>
<th>Number of School Reorganizations in Iowa</th>
<th>Additional Note(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966-1970</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1975</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1980</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1985</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-1990</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1995</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Financial incentives offered by state for sharing agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-2000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2005</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2010</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2015</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sense of Identity and Community Connectedness**

For many rural communities, there is a consistent debate on whether they will be able to support a school for future generations. The view of the rural school as an institution that is declining in student population each year, barely meeting its budget, and unable to match the academic and extra-curricular opportunities offered by more urban schools is prevalent. This general – if perhaps stereotypical – picture of a rural school has caused institutional leaders to consider ways to provide for the needs of the various rural stakeholders into the future. School consolidation is one of the considerations, but this consideration is not as simple as reviewing budgets and facilities, making a decision, and moving forward with that decision. One of the considerations is the typically intense desire by the community to continue to have a school that still represents the qualities that are valued and, perhaps, worth preserving within a rural area.
Community members identify with the school and this identification contributes to the community connectedness that is part of a rural culture.

**Social Capital**

Through the work of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995; 2000) the social capital of a group of people has been brought into prominence. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) stated social capital refers to connections among individuals and the social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. According to Putnam, social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in reciprocal social relationships. Interaction allows people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to connect the social fabric. The presence of social networks and a sense of belonging, as well as the relationships of tolerance and trust that can be involved, can have great advantages for people. Putnam found that a focus on tolerance and the acceptance, if not the celebration, of difference is required (2000). School consolidation can be a threat to social interaction and ties with others which ultimately can affect the level of social capital and identity. Trust with others, local interaction, and overall quality of life can experience a decline following school consolidation (Duncombe and Yinger, 2001).

**Sense of Connection**

Discussions on the topic of school consolidation may cause significant diverse emotional responses since rural stakeholders are typically connected to their schools. Rural stakeholders are also loyal to their communities and the factors creating the school’s identity.
Figure 1.1 Note left on the wall of a school building scheduled for demolition.

The sense of connection and belonging to the school can ignite intense feelings from a variety of stakeholders in rural communities as the possibility of merging their school with or being assumed by another school district is proposed. A sense of connection comes from the attachment to the iconic symbols of the school.

Figure 1.2 The hallway of a school.

**Culture of a School**

Residents of rural communities value their local school and what it represents and that feeling of value creates a sense of school identity or, rather, the feeling of being connected and belonging to a school. Identity with the school involves the institutional and educational culture — the shared meanings, shared sayings, and symbols of the school that create a sense of belonging for the people connected to the school.
This sense of belonging is grounded within the social identity approach derived from social psychology that proposes a person derives a sense of self through the groups in which he or she is connected. School identity, for example, can include connections with the school mascot, the school colors, the school building, the facilities surrounding the school building such as the athletic complex, and the activities of a particular school group and/or a specific time in the history of the school (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).

*Now our worlds are crashing together, and soon both will exist under a different and new mascot. It’s a strange new world.*

*Southard, 2012, para. 15*
Putnam (2000) posited that schools are important centers of social capital development as well as human capital development. Schools create valuable social connections among a community. The school within the community is a symbol of American values and traditions. The school building, carved into even the most remote areas of the American landscape, represents determination and fortitude.

Figure 1.5 The traditional brick school building.

**School Building**

In a two-year study conducted by Peshkin (1978) of rural communities experiencing the loss of businesses and population, the school was found to be the last preserver of community identity. Part of the identity exists with the school building itself. The building was literally built by the early inhabitants of the rural community and they toiled to maintain and improve it. The school district, through mutual interest, became a powerful symbol of rural organization (Hanifen, 1916; Gulliford, 1996). The local school represented the early settler’s investment in the future as well as a sign of their responsibility for the present. The school building was the heart of the community —the center of rural life (Kaestle & Foner, 1983).
Conversations about school consolidation in rural areas often concern the issue of whether or not the community will be able to maintain a school building located within the community. No matter how geographically removed – no matter how inconvenient or inaccessible – the presence of the school building within the rural community meant the children of the area would receive an education and the families of the children as well as the community would have a gathering place. The presence of the school building gave people an opportunity to come together, to make decisions together, to build together, and to have tangible evidence of their lives together.

Figure 1.6 The American flag flies above the school building.

Many rural communities have aging school buildings which need improvement to meet accessibility and safety laws (Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel, 2010). The conversations about the school building often also involve conversations about the ability of the community to thrive or even survive if a school building is not located within the community or if proximity to the school building is altered (Strange, 2011).

One of the top three goals...is to keep a school in each community... . The perception from my standpoint as an educator, from my school’s standpoint, is connection to the community. Community ownership in the school, what goes on inside this brick building that the community can buy in and support. Because obviously some of it is financial... with rising expenses and lower student population, how do you keep things going?

Changes to School, Changes to Community

Population loss within the rural community, especially of young adults, is a major factor in the school consolidation concerns in many rural areas (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie, 2011). Net migration out from rural counties due to moving out and death has exceeded net migration in due to moving in and births (US Census, 2010). Less students has meant increasing per pupil cost in rural schools resulting in negative fiscal implications that will likely not reverse without exploring new ways to educate students (Strange, 2011). Many people think if the school changes, the rural community may also change.

Peshkin (1978) postulated that school consolidation has both literal and symbolic importance. The literal results are very clear; the combining of school enrollment mean schools and districts get larger. Getting larger also means some schools are closed and some communities may decline in population and face a continued or accelerated decline in the town’s social and economic condition. Within a rural area, there can be a consistent concern about the potential loss of community population as the school district changes and this concern increases if the community experiences the loss of a school building within the community. As the children attend school outside of the community, the traffic within the community may decrease. This reduction in people coming into the community often leads to the formation of a different dynamic within the rural community.

*It meant something, didn’t it? If not, then why do sights, sounds and smells still reside in our memory like ghosts in a haunted manor?*

*Southard, 2012, para. 5*

For people, this literal result carries substantial symbolic importance that policymakers must understand and take seriously. Controversies arise during school consolidation discussions about many issues including best use of school finances, condition and maintenance of facilities,
requirements imposed by state and federal mandates, symbols and artifacts of the school, and, the overall role of the school in the community.

**Gap in Research**

The vitality and well-being of people within the rural community and the rural community itself are affected by school consolidation. Members of the rural community desire to protect, preserve, and defend the local school including the built and natural environment of the school facilities through their collective behaviors. Ward and Rink, in a case study utilizing qualitative interviews with local community members, told of the local stakeholder opposition to school consolidation in an Illinois community (1992). The major findings suggested that “the theme of loss throughout consolidation resistance data does not focus so much on the loss of local control as it does on loss of identity” (Ward & Rink, 1992, p. 15). This idea of identity is a recurrent theme when discussing the closure of local schools.

Though these documented connections to the school and the school building exist and there has been an increase in research pertaining to school consolidation issues, only a small amount of work exists on the role of school identity in the school consolidation decision-making process. This is due, in part, to the more nondefined method of assessing and conveying the message about school identity. Other impacts of school consolidation are more quantifiable, which is typically the information that gets shared more readily and is presented by legislators and administrators; it is more straightforward to present information on the costs and benefits concerning buildings and human resources than it is to present on the school identity issue.

The research specifically connected the influence of the environment with the various stages of thinking that might exist among the participants; the social identity that grows from the school identity. Though it is evident the emotional bonds to the school as well as cognitive aspects such as memories, knowledge, understanding, and meaning can be a barrier during the
school consolidation process, little is known about how individuals confront and gain some satisfaction with these more nebulous issues, both as individuals and as members of the school and rural community.

This desire to address the importance and give attention to the social identity which grows from the school identity highlights the gap in the research that this study addressed. There were complex place and social cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that were manifested in response to environmental disruptions or threats, and that led to individual and collective actions, adaptations, and acceptance or rejection of the disruption. The limited research that has emerged regarding the school identity issue, the impact on an individual’s self-perceived identity, and the connection that results between school and community has helped provide the framework for this study.

This research takes a qualitative approach towards understanding how the identity issues involved in school consolidation are identified and addressed by the school superintendent, school board president, selected alumni students and selected community members. The study sought to explain what rural school consolidation is and what it entails, to determine the impact of rural school consolidation on various stakeholders’ self-perceived identity, to describe what selected stakeholders expect from rural school consolidation and how the experiences caused the stakeholders to support or resist school consolidation, to synthesize the several strands of evidence related to the experience of rural school consolidation consideration, to state the major research findings, and, finally, to offer recommendations based on the findings.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout my 32 years working as an educator within rural school districts and an additional six years working as a professor in a preservice teacher education program, I realized the function of place within the context of experiences. I saw firsthand how important being in
and knowing a place was to people; I noticed how loyal people were to their school and the traditions and symbols of the school. There was a comfort that came from places of familiarity and an allegiance that was solid even as athletic teams won or lost and hardships occurred. When people were confronted with experiences that took them outside the normal places of comfort and there was a perceived threat to the environment that was known, shifts in attitude resulted and often tension occurred.

This tension, and my desire through the years to address and reduce the tension, caused me to question how relationships and experiences of individuals could be transformed to result in a positive outcome. I wondered if understanding collective, contested, diverse, divergent and connected relationships within a place could inform a planned change and lead to a more positive outcome. I wondered if by addressing the areas of difference, the perceived sense of loss that may be present, and the colonization across cultural groups, then the change may better serve the very communities in which the change is happening.

This dissertation explored the interrogation of what makes a place and the role of the individual within that place. Furthermore, this dissertation addressed the process of change in a rural environment and the experiences of the individuals affected by that change. The emphasis of the study was on the implications of a potentially changing school identity and the experiences of various stakeholders during school consolidation consideration within a rural school in the Midwest, especially from the perspective of school administrators, students, and community members. The research focused on the role of social identity that grows from school identity related to the issue of rural school consolidation and to explore the affective, behavioral and social factors that are involved in the consideration of consolidation of a rural school district.
We can crunch mounds of empirical evidence to say, oh maybe you should consolidate. On the other hand, there are these fragile, soft values that can’t be quantified.  
*Lyson, 2002*

School identity is the feeling of being connected and belonging to a school. When the stakeholders of a school district have a strong school identity, they are more likely to view their school’s norms and values as being self-relevant and, therefore, increase the sense of belonging. Also, they are more likely to want to live up to the aspirations of the school (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978). Visible cultural signs of school identity are PTA groups, attendance at parent teacher conferences, school sport teams, local business support for school events, wearing of school apparel, high school reunions, intergenerational connections, gathering places, and school colors visible throughout the school community.

![Figure 1.7](image1.png)

Figure 1.7 Note left on the wall of a school building scheduled for demolition.

![Figure 1.8](image2.png)

Figure 1.8 Note left on the wall of a school building scheduled for demolition.
Research has shown that school identity is built on clear communication and relationships with students, staff and parents as well as school having a clearly articulated sense of shared mission. According to Reynolds (2016) at the Australian National University School of Psychology, school identity is “about schools communicating their values, and why they do the
things they do. It’s hard to feel connected to a group if you don’t know what that group stands for” (p. 1).

This study focused on the role of school identity and the importance of the issue in the process of school consolidation. The rich ties and established sense of place connecting people are affected and bring the unspoken issues of a community to the surface. It was my intention to uncover the places of tension and comfort that I considered as those issues where decolonization and re-inhabitation are needed, as explored by Greenwood (2008) and his conceptualization of a critical pedagogy of place. Greenwood explained decolonization as a removal from surroundings and re-inhabitation as the method of reconnection with the environment. Decolonization and re-inhabitation play out in communities along a fluid continuum as social and ecological manifestations of community weave themselves in and out of each. By understanding the sometimes difficult to define social, behavioral and affective factors, discussions regarding rural school consolidation became better informed. Certain findings will be of interest to various stakeholders who are contemplating school consolidation.

**Purpose of the Study**

As school districts face rising per pupil costs, declining enrollment and stable or reduced funding, school districts have begun pondering the options before them to best educate the students of their communities. School consolidation is one potential solution considered. A school district will need to consider the many challenges connected with school consolidation and how best to address the challenges. Maintaining personalization of the learning environment and a sense of community (school identity) is one of the challenges involved in the consideration of school consolidation. Resistance from community members regarding consolidation due to lack of understanding of local culture was discovered to be a challenge in a 1992 case study of a
school district consolidation (Ward & Rink, 1992). Unfortunately, studies of the school identity factor and the connection to a successful consolidation are rare.

As with any endeavor, this process of inquiry proved useful at many levels. A first and foremost concern was with the place and the people where and with whom I engaged in my research. This locale and these participants had the potential to deepen their understanding of the place they inhabited and the perspectives of their own cultural groups and peers. This process held personal significance as I am a member of a rural community which will benefit both from the feedback and insight that came from the research.

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of school identity during the consideration of rural school consolidation and to explore the affective, behavioral, and social factors that are involved within the consideration of consolidation of a rural Midwestern school district. What role did school identity play in school consolidation consideration? What were the questions and concerns about school identity posed by various stakeholders from the perspective of the Superintendent, President of the School Board, selected alumni students and selected members of the community? How were questions and concerns about school identity addressed by these various stakeholders? What were the biggest concerns and how were they addressed?

It was my goal to provide school districts considering reorganization or consolidation with a framework to help in addressing the issue of school identity in the process. I wanted school districts to seriously consider how the role of individual identity and school identity act as blockages or open doors and what can perhaps be done to address the area of community-building. To this end, two school districts were chosen which have been involved in school consolidation since 2012.
Research Questions

Research questions were formulated to provide tangible substance to school identity and individual identity within the consolidation process. The research questions were linked to the case study methodology to “provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied” (Hartley, 2004, p. 323). The research questions also provided foundational support for the investigation as a whole.

Question one: How does the school consolidation process impact various stakeholders’ self-perceived identity?

Question two: How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders?

Theoretical Framework

Interpretive theories are orientations to social reality based on the goal of understanding. Thus, we can define interpretive theories as tools used in research concerned with understanding how communities, cultures, or individuals create meaning from their lived experiences. Alvesson (2002) stated it is important researchers use theories with which they are knowledgeable and for which they feel an emotional preference. Alvesson (2002) further stated the theory should be intimately understood by the researcher so the use of the theory will allow for synthesis and application of theory during the research process. The theory gives a perspective which attempts to recognize the subjective nature of knowledge and deepens the knowledge attained.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development

The theoretical framework used for the study was Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological systems theory of human development. Bronfenbrenner contended that everything is interrelated


and interacts with each other. The focus of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory on relationships which create our lives and our world helped provide a context for examining the factors that play a role in the growth and development of individuals. Bronfenbrenner’s theory aids in understanding the psychological dimensions that occur as an individual interacts with the world around them. The individual always develops within a context according to Bronfenbrenner.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1988) stated that human development is a process that occurs in an environmental context as a joint function of characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups. Bronfenbrenner stated that “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996). The resulting response depends on those interactions and the perception and reaction to any disruptions to the environment.

The framework to look at how levels of social capital are directly tied to the number of contexts in and around a group can be used. Bronfenbrenner’s Theory focused the analysis of the role of school identity in the school consolidation process by helping clarify factors which controlled outcomes and explaining how a group of people interact or “bridge and bond” together creating social capital (Putnam, 2000). For example, a group of people who live, work, attend school, and worship together experience greater levels of social capital than a group with fewer of these contextual layers (Lin, 2001). Bronfenbrenner contended a researcher must not look only at an individual and his or her immediate environment but also deeply consider the interaction with the larger environment.
Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory has as a starting point the individual and the belief that development cannot exist without the participation of the individual influence and the willingness to change. Some individuals see possibilities while some individuals primarily see difficulties and obstacles. In Bronfenbrenner’s view it is impossible to understand human behavior and change over time without considering the variety of and numerous elements of the surrounding context. The goal was to examine the individual relationships within the cultural environments and within the wider society.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory helped focus the research questions which framed the reaction and viewpoints of people involved in the process. There were two research questions to be answered:

Question one: How does the school consolidation process impact various stakeholders’ self-perceived identity?

Question two: How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders?

In Bronfenbrenner’s view, the dynamic nature of his theory highlights the importance of understanding the interactions between proximal processes and the developing person and environment. Figure 1.12 presents the theoretical framework in the form of an ecological system working model for describing an environment as well as clarifying the roles and functions of the different elements and relations within the environment.
Figure 1.12 Bronfenbrenner's Theory. The graphic is adapted from Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979); Bronfenbrenner (2005); and Psychology Notes (2013)

Through this framework, Bronfenbrenner further identified the need to understand individuals’ development within their environments. One’s identity, Bronfenbrenner contended, is related to the symbolic identity of a place and the salient factors grounded in that place such as a school district or community. The environment can serve a meaning-making function to form an individual’s identity.

**Place Attachment**

In order to fully understand the evolving theoretical system of human development that made up the bioecological systems theory, it was necessary to also understand place attachment, which refers to individually or collectively determined meanings. This influence of place attachment on actions that affect ecosystem dynamics helped conceptualize the emotional attachment to a specific locale. Place attachment was a way of understanding connections between people, places and events that are occurring in the present or have occurred in the past, in order to plan and take action for the future. The attachment to place was an internal and
reflective activity for the individual and, also, an external and communal activity where a group of people were trying to solve multiple problems to gain larger goals. In the context of this study, the activity was self-perceived identity within the school consolidation process. Including an analysis of place meanings helped to understand what it is about a place that people value and might seek to preserve (figure 1.13).

Figure 1.13 Factors in place attachment

Place attachment conceptual tools were used to understand how sense of place may influence the resilience of a system through the examination of how place attachment and its subcomponents influenced adaptive and transformative capacity. These bonds were developed over time from the affective, social, and behavioral ties between individuals and groups and their environment. Emotional bonds to the home, community, and environment as well as the cognitive aspects of knowledge, understanding, meaning and place memory were important to the psychological process. These emotional and cognitive bonds provided a framework for both individual and group aspects of identity and manifested in behaviors that preserved, protected
and defended one’s community. If these bonds were perceived to be threatened, strong reactions resulted.

**Conceptual Framework**

In the conceptual framework (figure 1.14), place attachment provided a way to understand and evaluate the roots and motivation of protective and restorative actions toward a threat to the environment and individual identity. An understanding of the components of place attachment provided the conceptual tools to examine, understand, and assess the complex developmental systems of Bronfenbrenner’s Theory.

![Figure 1.14 Place attachment within Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development](image)

**Figure 1.14** Place attachment within Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development

K.D. Bailey (1994) stated, “Social research has traditionally been defined as gathering of data that can help us answer questions about various aspects of society and can thus enable us to understand society” (p. 4). A primary goal of the study was to understand how the participants made meaning of their experiences, how consolidation affects stakeholders as well as looking at how social capital relates to change. Because an event like rural school consolidation can have a
tremendous impact on the social structure of students, their families, the communities, and the employees of the school district, Bronfenbrenner’s theory coupled with the conceptual tool of place attachment offer a lens for understanding and explaining the impact of rural school consolidation on the identity of the school and the identity of the stakeholders.

**Research Strategy**

The researcher acted as interpreter constructing meaning; therefore, the epistemology of the study is constructivist. Recognizing that “truth is not discovered but constructed” (Crotty, 2003) the researcher assumed the ability to participate in thematic development and analysis. Crotty (1998) also stated the “truth, or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (p. 8). It is the goal to trace how the construct of environment has been operationalized over time, and how these operationalizations have functioned to delimit or expand the scope of the knowledge acquired. Two separate school districts which have decided to consolidate were selected for the case study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants. These semi-structured interviews allowed for both exploration of revealed subject areas and the expansion of questions informed by discoveries (Merriam, 1998). The initial interview questions are included in Appendix A.

This study required an investigation of processes, inductive inquiry, and situational descriptions; therefore, qualitative methodology was applied to investigate the research questions and make meaning of the lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2013). Lived experience of the participants both prior to and during implementation was important to understand how he or she perceived their role in the process.

**Interviewing**

Phenomenological interviewing was used to understand the lived experience of participants from their point of view (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). This study used a
modified version of Seidman’s (2013) three-interview series to build connections between experiences, perceptions of the experiences, and role development. Creswell (2013) explained the need to get as close as possible to the subject of the study in a qualitative project. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the interpretation of constructed realities of participants and contributed to understanding.

Data analysis began during the interviews as the researcher took field notes that intentionally captured emotional responses of the participants and their enthusiasm for the ideas and answers they shared. The use of field notes is based within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm that acknowledges the importance of context and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and ‘researched’.

**Field Notes**

The process used for the field notes was recommended by Mulhall and allowed the interviewer to remain an active participant as information was gathered and interpreted (Mulhall, 2003, p. 309). Attention to the form, meaning, construction and use of field notes allowed the researcher to clarify the context of the interview. Field notes included the following: 1) structural and organizational features – the usage and appearance of the building and environment; 2) people – how they behaved, interacted, dressed, moved; 3) the regular process of activities; 4) any significant events that occurred such as meetings, interruptions to the interview; 5) dialogue; 6) an everyday diary of events as they occurred both in the field and before entering the field; 7) a reflective and personal diary which included the researcher’s thoughts about going into the field and being there, and reflections on the researcher’s life experiences that might have influenced the way in which the researcher filters what was observed (Mulhall, 2003). A guide for field notes is included in Appendix B.
After each interview, I expanded and completed the field notes, adding detail to the key thoughts and the responses. After transferring all data to written form, the researcher conducted multiple readings of all materials and then began the open coding process, developing themes and sub-themes.

Documents were reviewed including meeting minutes and notes. Participant identity was protected throughout the dissertation process. Pseudonyms were used and data and recordings were stored on password protected computers and files.

**Significance of the Study**

This study focused on the importance of school identity in the consideration of rural school consolidation and the role school identity played in school consolidation. This study addressed the gap that had been identified in research on consolidation of rural school districts. An area of research that was vital but missing was the role of school identity in the consideration of school consolidation. The approach taken in this study did not examine the overall outcome of the school consolidation process; rather, it examined the perceptions of various stakeholders making sense of the school consolidation process. This approach was built on the assumption of the need for a study that examines the way participants make meaning of their role in the school consolidation process. Typically the literature on school consolidation had focused on quantifiable issues and had not considered the individual feelings and experiences and then noted how to place these emotions in the larger, sociopolitical context in which planners need to operate. The approach to school identity can lead to success or lack of success with consolidation. Concern on the part of at least one community over the possibility of losing their school and therefore their identity, differences of opinions that arise around transportation issues, a lack of trust and long-standing rivalries between communities, and conflicts when selecting a new name for the district and a new mascot and school colors can be barriers to consolidation.
The study’s primary significance was its value to educational administrators and governing board members involved in rural school district consolidation. The study aimed to make it possible for rural school district officials to more clearly and concisely determine the importance of the school identity issue in the rural school consolidation process or consideration. The research questions wanted to know if understanding collective, contested, diverse, divergent and connected relationships within a place could inform a planned change and lead to a more positive outcome. Furthermore, I wanted to know if by addressing the areas of difference, the perceived sense of loss that may be present, and the colonization across cultural groups, then the change may better serve the very communities in which the change was happening. Such knowledge should prove beneficial for future decision-making purposes both in the design and implementation phases.

Case study was used for the research. Stake’s (1995) description of case study is that the study is conducted by the researcher due to the researcher’s general interest in the case. The case is completed by the researcher because it provides the researcher with a sense of satisfaction. On the other hand, a particular phenomenon explored by a case study provides the researcher with a “general understanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 3). School consolidation is a broad topic. Among issues such as school identity as well as economics, geography, and education, consolidation presented ample societal change for analysis. This study took a qualitative approach toward understanding how the forces impacting school consolidation were perceived by stakeholders who witnessed the process.

This study also had significance for educational leaders and policymakers in education throughout the Midwest and the nation in general. At present, information concerning school identity in the rural school consolidation issue is not easily accessible. This study provided
readily available information for educators and policymakers alike that also adds to previous research.

**Delimitations**

Because of the emphasis put on the study’s possible practical value, the investigation was purposely delimited to the two school districts in order to serve the following purpose: to help school district decision-making officials clearly and concisely determine the role school identity plays in affecting the success or failure of the consolidated school district. Delimitations for the study were primarily driven by the selection of participants. The participants selected included a sampling of administrators, students, and community members. The limited number of participants interviewed may inhibit the ability to generalize findings to all school districts.

**Limitations**

Qualitative investigations are designed to offer findings, conclusions, and recommendations that are informative as opposed to being literally generalizable. For this reason, this study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations are limited insofar as they were not intended to be completely applicable, even in analogous circumstances. The six study participants represented a relatively homogeneous group of individuals which does not diminish the authenticity of the data but must be accounted for when evaluating the nature and potential applicability of its findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Therefore, the primary limitation of this study was that it is a case study involving two rural Midwestern school districts which chose to consolidate into one school district. The locally grounded nature of case study research provided rich context and insight into participant experiences and sense making. However, findings are primarily indicative of the demographics and geographical study area and are only logically generalizable to other similar locations and populations.
Another limitation of this study that should be acknowledged is the investigation’s nature as a case study centering on school district consolidation in only one Midwestern state. Inferences drawn essentially apply to the state in which the rural schools are located. Results cannot be readily generalized to rural school districts in other states.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined for use in this research:

*Affective* - This means being concerned with or arousing feelings or emotions (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Autonomy* - This means freedom from external control or influence (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).

*Behavioral* - This refers to one's actions before or toward others, especially on a particular occasion (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Cognitive* - This is the mental process of knowing, including aspects such as awareness, perception, reasoning, and judgment (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Community* - This is an area of any size in which the people have common interest or interests. A community is a defined place or location where groups of people interact for mutual support (Smith, 2001).

*Community Members* – Residents of the geographic area comprising the school district. The residents may reside in the rural area or within the city limits of the towns within the school district (Smith, 2001).

*Consolidation* – This is the merging of two or more attendance areas to form a larger school (Peshkin, 1978).

*Integration* - This exists when separate things or people are brought together (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).
Local School District – This is any area or territory creating a legal entity, whose boundary lines are a matter of public record, whose purpose is that of providing free school education, and the area of which constitutes a complete taxing unit (US Dept. of Education, 2017).

Organizational identity – This is what is formed by the construction and interaction of meaning between external and internal audiences of the entity. It is based on local meanings and organizational symbols (Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

Place definition – This is the socially negotiated and constructed boundaries of the place, and the attributes and features that give it a distinctive identity in the minds of the inhabitants (Schneider, 1986).

Reorganization – This is the combining of two or more previously independent school districts in one new and larger school system (Peshkin, 1978).

Rural School District – The term rural school district means a school district that does not include within its geographic boundaries a municipality exceeding a population of 5,000 people and that is characterized by sparse, widespread populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Rural- The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defines “rural” as all population, housing, and territory having less than 2,500 people. Socio-Cultural theories such as Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development frame rural in terms of formal and informal community fields and social and cultural networks. There are shared and similar values and objectives relating to the community based on reciprocity and community engagement (Koziol, et al, 2015).

School Board – This is the governing body of the school district. The primary responsibilities are to set the goals and vision for the district, hire and evaluate the superintendent adopt policies
that give the district direction to set priorities and achieve its goals, and adopt and oversee the annual budget (Blumsack & McCabe, 2017; GreatSchools, 2018).

School Superintendent – In the field of education in America, a superintendent or superintendent of schools is a manager or administrator in charge of a number of public schools or a school district. The powers and role of the superintendent vary among areas (GreatSchools, 2015).

School Board President – The School Board President conducts board meetings, sets agenda items with the superintendent, helps keep the public informed of the district’s progress and challenges serves as a bridge between the Board and the superintendent, and is a voice of the Board at meetings and for the media (Blumsack & McCabe, 2017, GreatSchools, 2018).

School identity – The personalization of the learning environment and a sense of connection and belonging (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).

Social capital - Describes connections within a group or community characterised by high levels of similarity in demographic characteristics, attitudes, and available information and resources. (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social factors - These are the facts and experiences that influence a person’s personality, attitudes and lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1986).

Stakeholders - For this study, “stakeholders” referred to students, teachers, parents, administrators, school board members and community members (US Dept. of Education, 2017).

Traditions - This is the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).

Vitality - This is the capacity for survival or for the continuation of a meaningful or purposeful existence (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).
Whole grade sharing – This is an agreement used by school districts to provide for the education of students, in one or more grades from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. All or a substantial portion of the pupils in any grade in two or more school districts share an educational program for all or a substantial portion of a school day (Iowa Dept. of Education, 2015; Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction, 2017).

Although the terminology chosen by lawmakers or researchers may be different, most community members continue to use the term “consolidation” when referring to any type of school unification, merger, or reorganization. Regardless of the terminology used in the literature, the perception by many affected by the consolidation or reorganization process is that “someone wins and someone loses” as a result of the process (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005).

Summary of Chapter One

An overview of the role of school identity in the school consolidation process was provided in this chapter to highlight the need for understanding the impact of the process on various stakeholders. The significance of the experiences of the stakeholders throughout the process was established as well as justification for phenomenological inquiry to address the research questions. To develop the research design for this study, investigation of available literature on rural school consolidation, place identification, identifying rural, and social capital was explored in the literature review.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. An introduction to the research study including some of the history of school consolidation, the declining number of school districts, the potential for increased consolidation, the dwindling rural population is provided in chapter one. Chapter two presents a review of the literature and documents what it means to be rural, the
optimal school or school district size, the optimal school services, the role of the school in the community, resistance to school consolidation, definition of school identity, the importance of school identity, and the factors influencing school identity. This chapter clearly demonstrates the paucity of research on the connection between the collective, contested, diverse, divergent and connected relationships within a place and how knowledge of these relationships can inform a planned change and lead to a more positive outcome.

The methodology used in this research is described in chapter three. The epistemology, methods and methodology, goodness and trustworthiness, and researcher positionality and role are expanded upon in this chapter. This chapter also provides information on the research sites and participants. Chapter four offers a more detailed description of the cases studied and a summary of the research results and analysis. Chapter five is the dissertation’s final chapter and offers a discussion of the findings, recommendations for future practice and research, and researcher reflections.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature focused on rural school district consolidations in the United States, specifically rural schools in Iowa. In particular, the research and issues undergirding rural school district consolidation were examined. The research began with an examination of rural America, and continued with an exploration of school identity within rural America and a historical review of school consolidation, and then explored the issues involved in school consolidation such as declining enrollment, resistance, school services, and school size. The issue of school identity within school consolidation was explored in more depth to better determine the amount of research in this area.

**What it Means to be Rural**

*I once asked a man who lived in a town of fewer than 1,000 residents in a remote area of the Great Plains if he considered himself “rural.” “Oh, no,” he quickly protested. “I live here in town, not on a farm.”*

Strange, 2011, para. 3

Understanding and defining rural is challenging. When the United States was first formed and then for the first 100 years of its existence, most Americans lived in open areas and small towns. However, the urban population continued to gain in numbers with the 1920 U.S. Census being the first to record that the urban population outnumbered the rural population (Human Resources and Services Administration, 2018). Many people define rural as “any place smaller than where I live” (Strange, 2011, p. 9). As of 2001, rural America included 83 percent of the nation’s land and contained 21 percent of its population (Human Resources and Services Administration, 2018).

The federal government uses two major definitions of “rural”. One definition is produced by the Office of Management and Budget and the other derives from the U.S. Census Bureau. In a report entitled “Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas”, the Office of
Management and Budget (2000) defined rural in three categories. The categories are the fringe rural population, the distant rural population and the remote rural population. The fringe rural population is generally defined as a rural territory within five miles from an urbanized area or center. The distant rural population is generally defined as a rural territory that is within 5 to 25 miles from an urbanized area or center. A remote rural territory is typically more than 25 miles from an urbanized area or center.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defined “rural” as all population, housing, and territory having less than 2,500 people. Under this definition, about 19.3% of the U.S. population in 2010 (59.5 million people), was considered rural but more than 95% of the land area was classified as rural (U.S. Census, 2010).

**The Rural Community**

The word “rural” is often associated with agriculture-driven environments. This is not necessarily the case; rural can also refer to areas that claim a population that ranges from 1,000 to 5,000 people (Sanders, 1977, p. 2). Cultural theories such as Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development frame rural in terms of formal and informal social and cultural networks and community fields. Rural means strong ties exist among members within a community and also among wider neighboring communities that help provide sufficiency of resources and prevent isolation. There are widely shared values and objectives pertaining to the community based on reciprocity and civic engagement (Koziol, et al, 2015). In social-cultural conceptualizations of rural, the importance of non-tangible indicators of space such as cognitive structures and social representations are considered. The community networks have embedded individual and group-level social ties as well as cultural practices that reinforce the behaviors within a given location. These networks promote social cohesion and social norms that help promote the conceptualization of rural.
The Rural Image

Theobald and Wood (2010) stated that from the first days as a nation, urban and rural interests differed, the differences created struggle, and the struggle resulted in mutual suspicion between urban and rural cultures. Theobald and Wood continued to explain this struggle by explaining that rural culture is often caricatured as having less importance, ignorant, and, in many ways, ineradicable. Howley and Howley (2012) discussed the rural values of community, hard work, stewardship and frugality “come increasingly to be viewed as unsavory – backward, conservative, and irrelevant – a native anathema to be eradicated” (p. 47).

According to Strange (2011), rural people remain one of the last groups about whom cultural slurs are considered politically acceptable speech. Strange suggested that rural people are subjected to cultural defamations such as hick, hillbilly, hayseed or redneck because they are too willing to accept them (2011). In a study conducted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, rural respondents said they regreted what they saw as unfair depictions of rural Americans as a group of people who lack sophistication. The study found perceptions of rural America are centered on a series of dichotomies – rural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times; rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling; rural life is richer in community life, but epitomized by individuals struggling independently to make ends meet (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2014).

The Rural School

Within the United States, more than 25 percent of the public schools are rural, with almost 17 percent of the United States student population classified as rural (Why Rural Matters, 2017). Some parts of the United States have more rural areas than other parts. For example, more than half of Iowa’s school districts are classified as rural, coming in at 50.3 percent,
ranking 12th in the nation. Illinois has 20.9 percent of its schools classified as rural (Why Rural Matters, 2017).

**Rural Identity and the School**

The definition of identity is somewhat ambiguous because there are many factors that interact to construct identity. Personal, cultural, events and experiences, gender, and contextual factors contribute to the identity development of stakeholders within a school community. People constantly negotiate these identities (Deaux and Ethier, 1998). Research on the shaping and negotiation of identities has been conducted across various disciplines. The work of social psychologists, sociologists, and communication scholars has produced much of the literature on identity and addresses how one’s identity is impacted by a number of social factors. School identity focuses on embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, beliefs, or assumptions that the members have about their institution or its work (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). Identity provides members with a sense of what is unique or distinct about their institution and how it differs from other academic institutions (Kuh, et al., 2005; Peterson & Spencer, 1990). Identity is also embedded and enduring whereas change happens mainly by sudden, violent upheaval or through slower, intensive, and long term effort. The complexity and elusive nature of identity limits comparative research (Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

**How We Think**

Most will agree that identity is socially constructed – that is, a sense of self is only so because of a person’s contact with others. Accordingly, Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993) pointed out that, “identity is defined by the individual and is co-created as people come into contact with one another and the environment. As people aligned themselves with various groups this co-creation process is negotiated” (p. 30). Memory is relevant in creating an identity since memory influences feelings, attitudes, well-being, and pride. Identity also has a historical
context since it involves relationships with traditions, customs, laws and values. There is the ongoing struggle within a culture to navigate the dynamics of empathy of another and the tensions of tolerating another in an established culture.

**How We Act**

Identity is formed by finding meaning within what an environment can provide. An identity is constructed by being rooted in a place and the feelings of wellbeing, security, and connections that result from this environment. Social institutions and geographic location are two aspects that aid in the creation of one’s identity. The identity of rural inhabitants is shaped by a number of factors including the experiences that are unique to rural areas. Ching and Creed (1997) highlighted the impact of rural life on one’s identity. The mainstays of American life are its social institutions. These institutions – the family, the church, the government, and schools – are the foundations upon which all other things emerge and are defined in this society. The schools, in particular, pacify pedagogical responsibilities. Identification or attachment with a school is sometimes referred to as engagement. No matter the term, the emphasis is on the origin of student value systems with respect to school and the educational process. School identity may have multiple sources itself such as school colors, school mascot, school activities, school facilities, and school personnel. The participation-identification model posits that belonging to and valuing school combine to form a student’s overall identification with school (Finn, 1989). Whether or not ‘valuing’ and ‘belonging’ can be separated in practice or in theory, there is expansive theoretical agreement that school attachment is linked to more concrete participation in school activities, including decision making, participation in extra-curricular activities, classroom behavior, etc (Finn, 1989).
Role of School in Community

As rural Iowans face the potential loss of their school districts, there may be more at stake than just the loss of the school district alone. Historically, schools have played a major role in the life of rural communities, transmitting important knowledge and values, serving as the center for community events, and supporting economic and civic development (DeYoung, 1995). Beyond the primary mission education, schools within rural communities often serve many functions (National Education Association, 2008). Affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions are changed within the organized community participation and informal neighboring that is part of the rural environment (Mihaylov, N. & Perkins, D.D., 2014). The loss of a school can leave a void in a community. School consolidation can make it more difficult for students to be engaged in their community and the school may be unable to serve the broader population as it has in the past (Green, 2013).

*Travis Schueller, shared superintendent of North Kassuth and North Linn School Districts,* says:  *They’re more scared that they’re going to lose something they had in the past – a voice, a history, a building. We’re not consolidating to get rid of a building. We’re consolidating to continue to exist.*

*Duffy, 2017, para. 21*

Studies have found that when community interests were ignored during consolidation planning, community disintegration and educational absenteeism have increased. Schools were no longer seen as vital to the local community (Nachtega, 1982). The desire for larger rural schools seems to have steadily increased over the last century, but many communities continue to resist the closing of their local schools. Researchers who attempt to disprove the notion of the improved efficiency of larger schools argue that school consolidation actually creates greater hardships for families as children leave familiar neighborhoods, additional taxes are levied to support mergers and larger facilities are built (Krietlow, 1966; Sher, 1995; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Howley & Eckman, 1997). The advantages of the rural school-community relationship
have been well documented in the literature (Oncescu & Giles, 2014). Epstein (1995) contended that involvement with family and communities is a no-cost benefit of smaller schools that helps students to live better and richer lives, and to connect more fully with their community and school as well. Maynard and Howley (1997) stated that when parents get involved in education, children try harder and achieve more at school.

Another factor involved is the importance of smaller school identity in rural communities, which has received limited attention and study. That factor is the importance of a smaller school identity for the rural community. The school district has social significance within the rural community and the rural school can be seen as the last stronghold of symbolic identity for the community (DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Fanning, 1995; Peshkin, 1982). Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel (2010) told of the role of the local school serving the symbolic function of vitality, autonomy, integration, and traditions of the community. Networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity within a child’s family, school or peer group and community have significant effects on the child’s choices and opportunities and, on the development and behavior of the child (Putnam, 2000). Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2010) also stated few studies specifically examine student and administrator perspectives on school consolidation and school identity.

_Terry Kenealy, shared superintendent of Battle Creek-Ida Grove and Odebolt-Arthur says: There are a lot of rational reasons why it makes sense to do it. The rational reasons don’t always win out over the emotional issues._

_Duffy, 2017, para. 24_

According to Alsbury and Shaw (2005), a qualitative study of superintendents from rural districts across the United States showed that community members’ fears about the loss of unique community identities and ways of life comprised the most significant reasons for community opposition to district consolidation. Howley and Huang (1993) stated that policy
makers and school administrators at the state and local levels often rely on covert methods because consolidation often provokes emotional resistance. Rather than address the issue of school and community identity, state and local officials present the more quantitative information on fiscal responsibility and facilities and resist addressing the more emotional aspects of school consolidation. If and when confronted, officials attempt to respond to questions with defense and little response which can be perceived as avoidance and lack of acknowledgment of the emotion within the community.

As school consolidation is discussed, statements about the loss of community identity or the loss of community attachment are common (Peshkin, 1978; Fitchen, 1991; Lasley, et al., 1995; Nachtiga, 1982; Luloff and Swanson, 1990; Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2006). The center of community activity shifts, according to Killeen & Sipple (2000). Their research found that when two school districts merged or otherwise merged their boundaries, the geographic center of that area also shifted to a different location. This same phenomena exists when schools closed or modified their attendance boundaries. Because of the effect of low population density and larger school boundaries, students living at the edges of the new boundary had to travel further to attend their school.

**Importance of Identity: What Matters**

Ward and Rink (1992) conducted a study of four school boards who were in the initial phase of establishing a single unit school district. As the process continued, a central district school administrator expressed the opinion that the school is often the center of the community and is its identifying standard bearer. Fear was expressed that consolidation would lead to a loss of community identity and slow decline of the community.
Organizational Change

The elimination of small schools in favor of larger ones, the process of school consolidation, was thought to give students access to a more comprehensive education and began as early as the mid 1800’s (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005). The access to improved transportation methods and better roads allowed students to travel greater distances in less time, decreasing the need for the many one-room schools (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005).

The school consolidation movement was fueled in the late nineteenth century by the rise of industry. School reformers felt education could follow the industrial era concept where one reduces costs and increases productivity by increasing the size of the operation and follows organizational techniques (Duyar & Collins, 2008; Self, 2001; Orr, 1992). The move toward more efficient and economical larger schools also encouraged the sentiment that all schools should look alike. Early school reformers and policy makers began to advocate for an urban, centralized model of education (Kay, Hargood, & Russell 1982). Therefore, urban and larger schools were adopted as the model to follow and from this belief rural schools were judged inferior to the larger schools.

Optimal Size

As school reformers and policy makers were advocating for the creation of larger schools and the methods to increase efficiency, there were also studies on the ideal size of a school to maximize efficiency in the operation of the school. A review of that literature indicates there is not an ideal or optimal district or school size that is universally agreed upon. Conant (1959) posited that in order to offer the best possible curriculum to prepare high school students for college, there should be at least 100 students in a high school graduating class. Augenblick, Myers, and Silverstein (2001) determined in their study of Kansas school districts that in order to offer a safe and nurturing environment, extracurricular activities and an appropriate curriculum, a
school district should have a student population of no less than 260 students and no more than 2,925 students. Lawrence et al (2002) recommended that a district should have an enrollment of 4,000 to 5,000 students as a maximum. Imerman and Otto (2003) suggested that school districts should not fall below an enrollment of 750 students. Education Research Service reported the differences for optimum size varied greatly by age level of the students: 370 students within elementary schools, 500 students within middle schools, 679 students within junior high schools, and over 1,700 students within senior high schools (Barker, 1986).

Howley and Bickel (2001) determined that the school enrollment should be small if the students within the district have a low socioeconomic status. Based on the research, school district size seems to be an individual decision based on multiple factors with enrollment being just one of the factors. The consideration of the many local factors makes it more difficult to determine when consolidation or dissolution of a school district should be considered. Some states, especially, may have many school districts with lower enrollments due to geography and other factors. For example, in Iowa, 26 percent of students attend schools with less than 1,000 enrolled and 68 percent of the school districts have less than 1,000 students, which is relatively small by national standards (Iowa Policy Research, 2010; Stegmeir, 2014). These seemingly low enrollments compared to other states and geographic areas indicates there will likely be many Iowa school districts considering alternatives to existing as a nonconsolidated school district.

**Optimal School Services**

There are important factors within schools that can help lead to student success. These factors relate to academic achievement, school engagement, social opportunities, individualized and differentiated learning environment, curriculum offerings, technology, and activities (Applegate, 2008; Farmer, 2006; Gibbs, 2005; Howley, 2006; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). There is
an ongoing debate on whether small or larger schools are better able to provide a variety of services for students.

Students in smaller, community schools are more likely to participate in extra-and co-curricular activities (Barker & Gump, 1964). Not only can students more easily get to the activities, but there is more opportunity for students to compete. The larger the school, the more slots for sports, band, choir, school plays, etc., go to only students with exceptional ability and the less there are for the rest of the student body. The high levels of participation in small schools generate student interest and enthusiasm, provide opportunities for enhancing leadership and responsibility, and make students feel needed. Smallness also permits administrators and teachers to pay more individualized attention to students, to identify problems better and sooner, to provide special instruction, and to become personally acquainted with the students and their families. The educational process is enhanced by these traits and dropout rates decline. They also make for safer schools with far fewer discipline problems (Haller & Monk, 1992).

**Optimal Social Opportunities**

There is limited and often contradictory research on how larger, consolidated schools provide improved social opportunities since students may have access to a broader and more diverse network of friends (Sullivan, 2000). Furthermore, it is sometimes suggested that the relative anonymity of larger schools is beneficial to students’ social wellbeing. In a larger school, individual and family reputations are lesser known whereas, in a smaller school, individual and family reputations are more prominent. Also, members of small school communities are more likely to interact consistently and over time, which means the problematic relationships between students, among staff, between students and teachers, and between school personnel and community members, in smaller schools are more difficult to avoid or ignore (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010).
Stockard (2011) conducted a study which showed rural schools often have substantially more students at risk including larger proportions of children in poverty and those from minority backgrounds than do other schools in the nation. Smaller schools are typically able to provide more communal learning environments which promotes higher expectations for student behavior and achievement (Nathan & Thao, 2007).

Successful rural schools are able to provide a quality education as well as remain connected to their communities (Farmer, 2006; Gibbs, 2005; Howley, 2006; Schafft, 2010). One way the community connection is reflected is through attendance at school activities and events. The Rural America Report (2007) reported that in 2003, students in rural areas had greater percentages of parents who attended a school event than the parents of students in urban areas (74 percent vs. 65 percent). Also, the parents of rural students were more likely to serve as a volunteer or on a committee (42 percent vs. 38 percent) and attend athletic events outside of school than parents in urban areas (42 versus 34 and 38 percent, respectively). The research emphasized that the existence of strong community-school relations are essential for providing a quality education in rural schools. For rural youth, this community connection gives a sense of social responsibility, which is vital to the sustainability and welfare of rural communities.

**Finding Common Ground**

The decision to close school buildings or consolidate districts is perhaps the most troubling and painful challenge a community can face. The relationship of an individual to a school is related to cognition of the place as an extension of self, a sense of ownership of the place and the identity related to the symbolic meaning, and the investment in the place (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010). The school district can represent a feeling of physical rootedness in the community which is related to place identity and interdependence. There is also a sense of social bondedness based on the shared history, interests, or concerns represented by the school.
Emotional ties to a school are based not only on individual, intrapsychic processes but also on external, social processes that foster social cohesion and social control (Brown et al., 2003).

**Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral**

The three components of responses to change include cognitive response, affective response, and behavioral components. Cognitive response includes the empowerment toward change, giving individuals voice and choice and control over their lives. Another component to change is the affective response which includes the feeling of belonging to a group and an emotional connection based on shared history, interests or concerns. This is rooted in the feelings of mutual trust, social connections, shared concerns, and school and community values that lead to collaboration. The third component of response is behavioral and includes the social support and social interactions which create the feeling of individuals watching after each other. This social cohesion creates a network of trust and stability. While closing a school district is rare, consolidation and whole-grade sharing with rural schools is a trend, said Emily Piper, lobbyist for the Iowa Association of School Boards. Piper noted that in 1997 Iowa boasted 377 school districts and twenty years later, that number was down to 333. The trend to reorganization, according to Piper, is continuing at a steady pace (DeYoung, J., 2018).

**1,000 Piece Jigsaw Puzzle**

Barrett and Greene (2014) compared the process as having the same difficulty as assembling a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. Closing schools through consolidation can be a severe blow to communities as schools are often a major part of the cultural fabric of a community (Kysilko, 2003). As Duyar and Collins (2008) pointed out, “many communities rely heavily upon schools for facilities, entertainment, and information networking – schools are the lifeblood of the community” (p. 1). Loss of local control or a concern that the loss may occur seems to have been a major force in the opposition to consolidation. Local control is a complex issue
according to Ward & Rink (1992). Some of the factors within local control involve the commitment to democratic decision making. A grassroots surge to maintain local control can also signal an opposition to loss of prestige and power on the part of some individuals. Local control can also be a way to prolong and maintain unfair policies and discrimination against certain groups (Ward & Rink, 1992).

**Support or Resistance**

“We had a great school. I’m glad it is still going to be used. It was hard on us when it had to close.”

*DeYoung, J. 2018.*

Cubberley (1922) associated the resistance to closing the local school to the community’s ignorance, describing the rural resisters as unwilling to change, thrifty to a fault, unreasonable, overly traditional and lacking in any credible understanding of the value of good educational conditions. Cubberley (1922) posited that any progressive proposal would likely be met by determined and often unreasoning opposition, and progress by consent of the voters would be a slow and arduous undertaking.

It has been discovered that consolidation often creates deep and long-lasting divisions between the consolidated communities and negatively affects parental involvement in the schools, dropout rates, student achievement levels, and generally the quality of the educational experience (West Virginia Dept. of Education, 1998). Other factors that lead to resistance to school consolidation include; the longer time students may spend commuting because of larger geographic areas, the decreased ability of the student to participate in extracurricular activities due to the longer commute, the reduction in level of parental involvement due to lack of connection and greater distance, and the larger student population making it more difficult to address the differentiated needs of students (West Virginia Dept. of Education, 1998). Resisters
to school consolidation also state large schools dramatically increase the disadvantages that economically disadvantaged children typically confront.

Local resistance to consolidation is often fierce, especially in rural areas where the school is the central institution of the community. The local school, in the preconsolidation era, was “typically the key neighborhood institution binding neighbors and linking them to the larger social and cultural world around them” (Reynolds, 1999).

State governments, in response to resistance from the local communities, often tried using financial incentives to encourage consolidation or simply required consolidation by redefining district boundaries. Consolidation initiatives were often led by state departments of education as part of an effort to expand state control over accreditation issues, curriculum offerings and standards, and teacher certification that has previously been locally controlled (Strang, 1987).

Fanning (1995) found that small, rural towns and urban neighborhoods can offer community naturally. The school is often an interwoven part of the community. By dividing schools from communities, consolidation may be contributing to the social problems that concern educators and parents.

Planning for consolidation is challenging with the many issues involved. Studies overall on comprehensive consolidation plans are few and deal mainly with planning from the viewpoint of an administrator. A case study of a school district consolidation conducted by Ward and Rink (1992) found that failure to acknowledge the local culture resulted in resistance from members of the community about continuing the plan to consolidate. In a 1995 study on school consolidation planning involving Oklahoma superintendents, it was revealed that many successful consolidation strategies involved a consolidation plan, joint student body activities, maintenance of all school sites, and community meetings designed to allow open communication (Chance and
Cummins, 1998). A study of eight North Dakota communities that had experienced school consolidations showed that conducting public meetings was the most important factor in successfully continuing the process of consolidation (Sell, Lesitritz & Thompson, 1996).

**Review of Theoretical Lens**

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory (1993) was used for this study. To be able to apply Bronfenbrenner’s theory, it is necessary to also understand any examination of school consolidation requires recognition that schools and communities are complex systems, involving a network of overlapping and sometimes competing relationships that are affected by larger contextual factors. This section contains a description of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory and also includes how this theory applies in the field of education and the area of school and community collaboration more specifically.

The starting point of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory is the individual and the belief that development cannot exist without the participation of the individual influence and the willingness to change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Bronfenbrenner derived this bioecological paradigm from Lewin’s (as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005) who stated the behavior is a function of the interaction of a person with the environment. Using the bioecological systems theory helps researchers understand the complex interrelationship between the individual and society and focuses on development within a context or environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Bronfenbrenner’s view it is simply not possible to understand human behavior and change over time without considering the many and varied elements of the surrounding context. Through this framework, Bronfenbrenner further identified the need to understand individuals’ development within their environments.

As stated by Bronfenbrenner, “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving psychological
human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996). Bronfenbrenner contended true understanding was derived from understanding how the various systems interact with an individual and with each other.

Bronfenbrenner further contended everything interacts with each other and is interrelated, but at different times and to varying degrees. By focusing on relationships, both between the different systems and between people, Bronfenbrenner’s theory provided insight into the many factors that shape individual and societal growth and development. The goal was to examine the individual relationships within the cultural environments and within the wider society. Basically, the aim was to apply Bronfenbrenner’s theory to determine the environmental systems in which an individual interacts. Case study was used to explain what consolidation is and what it entails, to describe what proponents expect from consolidation, to synthesize the several strands of evidence related to both the experience and the results of consolidation and to state and offer recommendations based on the findings.

**Summary of Chapter Two**

In summary, school consolidation is often mentioned as a school-reform strategy. The issue of school consolidation has been a vibrant area of research for many years and the research has increased since the 1980s. The research attributes the mixed results observed on school consolidation with complexities introduced by state financial incentives and the interdependence of fiscal, educational, and social factors. The conversation about school consolidation is countercyclical and seems to escalate whenever state revenues fall. Trimming the number of school districts and schools is urged by various policymakers and state officials and various financial programs are initiated to encourage school consolidation. Advocates of consolidation tout significant cost reductions as an incentive. Writing in the *Journal of Education Finance* in
2002, Adams and Foster gave some good advice to policymakers when they encouraged them to assume nothing and analyze much when considering consolidation proposals. Adams and Foster further explained that purported benefits of larger organizational units do not materialize automatically. It was emphasized that context is important, and issues of efficiency, cost, student performance, educational climate, and community relations must be addressed.

School and community relationships can have numerous benefits for those residing in rural communities, and these relationships can have implications within the school consolidation process. Minimal research exists regarding how the issue of school identity can best be identified and addressed during the consideration and planning of school consolidation. There is little research on the variety of factors that influence school identity and the importance of school identity as school districts undergo changes. As school districts continue to consider consolidation and desire to have the planning be a noncontentious process, the stakeholders will need to address the role of school identity and how this plays a role for the students, administrators, and community in the school consolidation issue.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Methodology

Within chapter three, the research design and methodology used in the study is explained. Qualitative case study as well as the epistemological perspective of social constructivism are also explained in this chapter. I was able to construct meaning due to the data that emerged through the use of case study. The use of case study required me to understand, acknowledge, and prepare for the role of researcher and then to select research sites as well as study participants. The study participants then were engaged via observation, personal interviews, and artifact review. Finally, I adopted and implemented a specified system of methods that allowed for the collection and analysis of data.

Study participants had all experienced the planning and process of school consolidation. I applied triangulation, used peer review, gave adequate engagement in data collection, employed a reflexivity component, reviewed research by others, and provided the interview questions. In this chapter, detail about the background of the research sites of East Community School District and West Community School District is provided. Also included is an explanation of my position in relation to the study.

Why use Qualitative Research?

There have been numerous studies over time relating to the issues of school district size and consolidation, but very few address the variety of factors involved in the complex school consolidation decision making process. Seeking to answer some of the questions concerning school consolidation, I sought to examine the role of school identity in the consideration of rural school consolidation and to explore the social, affective, and behavioral factors that may have contributed to the decision to consolidate a rural school district. How does the school
consolidation process impact various stakeholders’ self-perceived identity? How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders?

To carry out this study, I chose to use qualitative research. Qualitative research methods were used to build upon theories and concepts through in-depth study of phenomena. As Merriam (2002) described,

Qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. Instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what the interpretations are in a point in time and in a particular context (pp. 3-4).

Merriam (2002) also stated the understanding gained from qualitative research is an end in itself and that the analysis of the situation leads to a depth of understanding. Creswell (2007) postulated the use of qualitative research methods provides opportunity to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction. While there are well-designed philosophical rationales and theoretical underpinnings to qualitative inquiry, the practical applications come down to a few very basic and simple ideas: pay attention, listen and watch, be open, think about what is heard and seen, document systematically, and apply what is learned (Patton, 1990).

I, as the researcher, am a learner in qualitative research and, as a learner, make choices that form and are formed by the continuing process of inquiry (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). Qualitative research has two unique features and both are vital to the view of learning that sees the learner as a gatherer and constructor of knowledge rather than a receiver: 1) the researcher is
the conduit through which the study is conducted, and 2) the purpose is to discover information about the social world (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). By listening attentively to people without directing the narratives or the interpretation of those through his or her perceptions, I could explore the experiences from the participants’ perspective and seek to gain a deeper understanding of the issue.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2012), qualitative research begins with questions and its ultimate purpose is learning. De Villiers (2005) stated qualitative research involves the use of a variety of data collection methods such as interviews, archives, questionnaires, and background notes to provide insights into cultural aspects, organizational practices, and human interactions. Qualitative research is exploratory work, according to De Villiers (2005), and the findings can be used to formulate hypotheses and questions. The parallels between the definition of qualitative case study, the theoretical framework, and the epistemological position of social constructionism allowed for the stories of the individuals to come through the qualitative research process.

Qualitative data may be considered non-numeric data and can be systematically collected and presented in narrative form. In qualitative research, researchers need to be extremely careful not to give their personal meaning to a phenomenon, but must work very hard to portray, or construct, the participants’ meanings. The why and how of decision making is investigated in the qualitative method, not just where, what, and when. Hence, the use of large samples is forsaken in favor of smaller, but specific samples. The qualitative case study involves researching the dynamics of a single entity or issue through one or more cases within a single setting or bounded system (Creswell, 2007). A human presence is needed to garner an overall feel of not only the people being studied, but also the place. The researcher needs to be aware to the differing
perspectives of varied stakeholders and collect data as well as report findings with multiple perspectives consistently in mind (Patton, 1990).

The qualitative researcher synthesizes the experiences and truths of the participants. Qualitative researchers must remember that qualitative methods produce information only about the particular cases studied and that any more general conclusions are only propositions/informed assertions. Utilizing the case study method makes it possible for the researcher to develop an understanding of a complex phenomenon as experienced by its participants: that is, those directly affected by the school consolidation issue. Applicability, transferability, and fittingness are used to generalize findings.

Researchers use qualitative methods when they believe that the best way to construct a proper representation is through in-depth study of phenomena. Often they address phenomena that they believe have been seriously misrepresented, sometimes by social researchers using other approaches, or perhaps not represented at all (Patton, 1990).

**Positionality**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary gatherer of information and as such, could optimize the data gathering process by utilizing his or her connections in the research location that may have been previously established (Merriam, 1998). This study was conducted in a way that was mindful of trustworthiness criteria, ethical considerations, limitations, and the researcher’s subjectivity. With qualitative research, the researcher can, and should, work very hard to ensure the goodness and trustworthiness of the study.

I approached this research with the reality that I have worked with K-12 rural school districts in various capacities for 38 years and have lived in a rural area for 57 years. In my present position as a professor of students enrolled in a teacher education program, I have a keen interest in the future of school districts and what teachers of the present and the future will need
to know to work with the larger school community. I am interested in learning about why individuals in a rural environment support or resist school consolidation and how their experiences as the process is evolving may or may not change their initial reaction. The voices of the individuals interviewed are important to the future efforts of my profession and my colleagues as we work to help our students understand the connection between school and community.

**Case Study**

For this research, case study was used. A case is the intense investigation of a specific instance of the phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006). Case study involves processes, events, or persons of interest to the researcher and is done to shed light on a phenomenon. Case study research starts from the desire to gain an in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases set in the context of the real-world (Bromley, 1986). The cases for this study were selected at the beginning or the design phase of the research study based upon the theoretical framework and anticipated results. After the case was defined and determined to be, as Yin (1994) suggested, a case that was important, distinctive, significant, and interesting, the case study design was selected. According to Yin (1994), the case study design must contain these parts: research questions and its propositions, unit of analysis, and a determination of how the data are linked to the propositions and criteria to analyze the findings. Case studies, Yin (1994) asserted, are the preferred strategy when “how” and “why” questions are asked. The concentration in case study research is on answering questions that ask how or why and the researcher has little or no control of events that are happening at the present. Case study must have a logical design, pre-determined data collection techniques, and pre-described data-analysis methods.

Merriam (2002) stated that “a case study is less of a methodological choice than ‘a choice of what is to be studied.’” The ‘what’ is a bounded system, a single entity, a unit around which
there are boundaries” (p. 178). Case study, according to Yin (1994), is a research design that investigates an identified phenomenon and follows specific procedures. Case study is an ideal method when an in-depth investigation is desired and are designed to bring out the details from the perspectives of the respondents. In order for the researcher to maintain distance from the research and obtain objective conclusions, Yin (1994) suggested the researcher closely follow the research question(s), its propositions, and its unit(s) of analysis which are part of the case study design to link the data and to interpret the findings. By following a small sample and a protocol to examine a limited number of variables, case study is, according to Yin, an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (1984, p. 23).

Single-subject research strategies such as case studies are especially appropriate in closely examining the behavior of individual subjects. In case studies, there is an intensive effort to understand a single unit of study within a complex content. Case study aids the researcher in asking “how” and “why” questions. The case study method was ideally suited for examining cases involving the school consolidation issue. The cases were examined in a way that would not have been possible using the statistical methods of quantitative research. Case study methods encouraged the gathering of information through a process of thick description.

Stake (2000, p. 436) identified the case study as “a specific, unique bounded system.” Stake described the case as an object to be studied for an identified and particular reason. Case selection procedures informed development of the study design and clarified the research question. Use of the case study in research, according to Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent (1998) is useful especially where examination of the context and the dynamics of a situation are important.
Stake (1995) proposed a type of case and study design called an instrumental case study which the researcher chose for this study. An instrumental case study is used to refine theory or provide insight on an issue. The case is selected to advance understanding of the object of interest and the case is used to understand more than what is apparent to the observer. The case highlights an issue or tests a generalization rather than focusing on the case itself (Stake, 1995).

Once the case study design is determined, it needs to be decided whether or not to use theory to help organize the data analysis strategies and to generalize the findings. The epistemological foundation is a way of the defining and understanding processes by which people come to explain, describe or otherwise account for the world around them. It is the view that knowledge and subsequent reality are dependent upon human practices embedded in the interaction between and among other human beings in an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998). The researcher is trying to construct something out of the reality. Using constructionism, meaningful reality is created through interaction between human beings and their world. It is an effort for people to make sense out of situations they experience. The researcher does not attempt to discover meaning but, rather, construct meaning through interaction with the participants.

**Research Design**

The researcher chose to use a constructivist epistemology approach to understand how school identity plays a role in school consolidation decisions. Epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, methods is essential to good qualitative research. Crotty (1998) defined epistemology as “how we know what we know” (p. 8). The “nature of knowledge” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8) is fully explored when conducting qualitative research. During the interview phase, researchers are able to fully explore study participants’ thoughts to see how the participants came to know what they know about the research topic.
Constructivist Epistemology

Epistemology, or the study of knowledge, is “a way of understanding and explaining how I know what I know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). There are many flavors of constructivism, but they all focus on how humans create systems of meaning to understand their world and their experience. Constructivism is associated with the view that what people may consider objective knowledge and truth are a result of perspective. For this study, a focus on understanding how meaning is socially constructed within a specific community was used. This focus on understanding experiences from the point of view of those who live them and also from the sense of place perspective. Sense of place is a way of understanding connections between people, places and events that are occurring in the present or have occurred in the past, in order to plan and take action for the future. The attachment to place is an internal and reflective activity for the individual and, also, an external and communal activity where a group of people are trying to solve multiple problems to gain larger goals. In the context of this study, the activity is self-perceived identity within the school consolidation process. Participants called upon their individual roles and identities and their interpretation of their communal role to represent cognitive, social, and behavioral factors. In addition, socially constructed factors of place attachment included participants’ perception of their place within the beliefs, values, culture, and norms of their local context.

Crotty (1998) stated that meaning is constructed, not discovered. Constructivism, as defined by Crotty (1998), is “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Constructivism epistemology, as defined by Crotty (1998), is meaning obtained through construction rather than by discovery. Even when involved in the same
phenomenon, people may construct meaning in different ways. Constructivism epistemology results in the emergence of meaning through a conscious engagement, embracing the unique experience of each participant. In the constructionist paradigm, meaning is created through an interaction of the interpreter and the interpreted (Crotty, 1998). Because of the overwhelming social context that surrounds an event like school consolidation and its impact on communities, families, and individual students, I attempted to approach the line of inquiry without any preconceptions or pre-meditated conclusions and hoped to gain a more authentic portrayal of reality by using this approach.

**Theoretical Lens**

A theoretical lens is best thought of as an organizing tool that allows researchers to further narrow and refine a study’s focus after a theoretical perspective has been decided upon. The research used the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to examine how consolidation affects stakeholders as well as how objective and subjective elements drive the course of human development. Dynamic forces investigated included the mutual trust, reciprocity, and formal/informal networks that exist among and within a community which help foster group trust. Within Bronfenbrenner’s Theory, the importance of civic engagement and social ties for the welfare of individuals and societies at large is underlined. Bronfenbrenner posited that the success of societies greatly depends on the horizontal bonds of collaboration: only long-term relationships are able to generate the cohesion that brings societal benefits.

Because an event like rural school consolidation can have a tremendous impact on the social structure of students, their families, the communities, and the employees of the school district, Bronfenbrenner’s theory offered a lens for understanding and explaining the impact of rural school consolidation on the identity of the stakeholders. Bailey (1994) stated, “Social
research has traditionally been defined as gathering of data that can help us answer questions about various aspects of society and can thus enable us to understand society” (p. 4).

This theoretical framework includes a look at how levels of social capital are directly tied to the number of contexts in and around a group. For example, a group of people who live, work, attend school, and worship together experience greater levels of social capital than a group with fewer of these contextual layers (Lin, 2001). Bronfenbrenner’s theory also included the specific concepts of “bridging and bonding” social capital (Putnam, 2000). It is this component of the theory that ultimately framed this study.

**Theoretical Perspective**

A theoretical perspective can be defined as “the philosophical stance that lies behind a methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). The theoretical framework provided some coherent explanation for why people were doing or saying what they were doing or saying. The theoretical framework guided the research project beyond mere description and took it into the realm of the explanatory. An interpretive theoretical perspective has a strong research basis in constructivist epistemology and the “emphasis is on understanding how individuals construct and interpret social reality” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 38). I anticipated that studying the perspectives constructed by the participants regarding the outcomes, short- and medium-term outcomes as well as potential long-term outcomes, and impact of the school consolidation process would help to understand a phenomenon, the perspectives, a process, and worldviews of the participants. The resulting interpretations are not fictional.

The theoretical perspective was essential to the research as it provided “a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and criteria” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). Constructivism is based on important realities dependent on human practices that are realized in their world. In this framework, the researcher-participant relationship is interactive, independent, and
subjective; there are complex and multiple realities; and all critical aspects of the research are valued including the researcher, research sites, participants, and theory (Broido & Manning, 2002).

In constructivism, meaning is not a hidden resource to be mined, rather the act of research merges to construct ideas, build perspectives, and develop concepts (Crotty, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). I was able to construct meaning due to data that emerged from the conscious engagement of study participants via personal interviews, background notes, and artifact review. The epistemological position aligned with the approach to studying a clearly human social problem and allowed for an open-ended conclusion dependent on human responses to the inquiry.

**Methodology**

As Crotty (1998) stated, methodology is “the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcome” (p. 3). The methodology the researcher applied to this study is phenomenology. In a phenomenological framework, the researcher enters into the research process having set aside preconceptions; instead, responding to and constructing meaning as it is revealed. Using phenomenology, researchers attempt to describe and interpret the complexities of a particular human experience. The researcher is challenged to repeatedly reflect upon an event, or other lived moment, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how participants experience, interpret and make meaning a particular phenomenon (Moustaksa, 1994). Jones (2002) stated that qualitative methodologies are grounded in “a concern for developing depth of understanding of a particular phenomenon and the construction of meaning that individuals attribute to experience” (p. 461). Yin (2013) added this approach serves to
explore the meaning of individual experiences and how these meanings can be reduced to a description of the experiences.

Using a phenomenological approach allowed me to examine the role of school identity during rural school consolidation and explore the affective and social factors that may have contributed to the perceived successful consolidation of a rural school district. I could acknowledge, understand, and prepare for the role of researcher; select a research site as well as study participants; and adopt and practice a particular collection of methods that allowed for the optimal collection and analysis of data.

**Methods - Interviews and Artifacts (Document Analysis)**

Case study data typically comes from multiple and not singular sources of evidence. Through using the case study method, data collection is done in natural settings, compared with relying on derived data (Bromley, 1986). Yin (2003) suggested there are six possible sources of evidence for case studies: archival records, interviews, documents, participant observation, direct observation, and physical artifacts. Gillham (2000) viewed the use of multiple sources of evidence as a “key characteristic of case study research” (p. 2) and “evidence is of some use to the case study researcher: nothing is turned away” (p. 20).

For this case study, information was drawn from archival documents, personal histories, semi-structured interviews, and background notes dating back to 2012 to excavate meanings which was the beginning of the discussions on whole grade sharing and consolidation of the two school districts. The data collected was examined and categorized according to patterns. Then the patterns or themes were interpreted to develop a more general interpretation of meaning. Triangulation of the multiple perspectives, methods, and sources of information, such as interviews and background notes, added depth and multiple insights to the analysis and enhanced the validity and credibility of the results.
Archival research involves seeking out and extracting evidence from original archival documents and records, such as school board minutes or school committee reports. Documents may be considered as written communications prepared for either personal reasons or official reasons in some instances. Records, on the other hand, are usually written communications that have an official purpose (Gall et al., 2006). For the purpose of this investigation, data were collected from school board meeting minutes and school committee reports. The official documents were excellent sources of information because of the care which official bodies exercised to make certain that such materials were accurate, complete, and carefully preserved. Insight gained from examining documents were transcribed in the form of notes to be used later in describing the findings. Themes, patterns, common words, phrases that emerged were recorded. Notes were carefully reviewed; themes and patterns were organized into categories to make connection between the archival data and the research questions.

The use of semi-structured interviews gave the opportunity to acquire data and construct meaning to answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews are more informal than a structured interview format and enable the participant’s point of view to emerge and be heard through his/her own voice. The interviewer constructed and then used a guide for the interviews which included a list of topics and questions that need to be covered during the interview, usually in a specific order. The interviewer followed the guide but was able to stray from the guide during the conversation if and when the interviewer felt this was essential. The interview was managed by the interviewer and was, basically, a verbal exchange and as such its effectiveness depended on the interpersonal skills of the interviewer (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007). Interpersonal skills such as the ability to use humility and humor to establish rapport were important. Trust was needed between interviewer and interviewee. The use of language by
the participants was considered essential in gaining insight into their values and perceptions. Also, contextual and relational aspects were observed as significant to understanding others’ perceptions and how data generated can be analyzed in different ways.

The interview’s purpose was to use conversation, discussion, as well as questioning, to provide insight on the investigation themes. Since the focus of the research from the beginning was on questions of identity and identification in a shifting organizational context, the various forms of data collection all centered on gaining insight and being mindful of emerging patterns. Guidelines for the interview questions and the interview process were based on the suggestions rendered by Lincoln & Guba (1985) along with Esterberg (2002). The authors stated that the researcher needs to (1) decide whom you will be interviewing; (2) prepare by researching your participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); (3) construct an interview guide; (4) decide what types of questions should be asked; (5) structure and order the interview questions; (6) create open-ended questions that are not dichotomous or leading, but are general and specific in nature (Esterberg, 2002; (7) plan the initial contact; (8) discuss the informed consent with participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); (9) construct a “face sheet” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 101) that includes participant’s demographic information, pseudonym or code number, contact information, and time/place of the interview; (10) keep the interview on track and productive; and (11) bring the interview to an end when new information is not forthcoming (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher conducted two 45 to 90 minute interviews with each participant, using a modified form of Seidman’s interview technique. Seidman advocated an interview protocol, which “allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action” (Seidman, 1998, p. 4). The first interview in Seidman’s protocol was designed to establish the context of the participants’ experience and focused on their life history. The second interview
encouraged participants to reconstruct the details of their present experiences in the context of the study and provided a detailed exploration of the experience. The second interview was also designed for participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. The two interview process allowed both the researcher and the participant to place the participant’s experience within a context and reflect on its meaning (Seidman, 2013). Each person participated in the two interviews with the researcher as the interviewer. Participants gave written informed consent. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Patton’s purposeful sampling technique was used to select participants. This technique meant participants were selected because they were likely to have the most knowledge about the research questions (Patton, 1990). Participants included a superintendent, a school board president, two alumni students and two community members. Community members and alumni students were selected through nominations by administrative participants. Administrative participants were asked to nominate multiple community members and alumni students based on their experience and engagement with the consideration of school consolidation. Community members and alumni students were then selected by the researcher from the lists of nominated individuals. The participants were determined by the researcher to be key persons in the institutions and communities and the insights gained would give further value to the study.

Participant names were not identified. In transcriptions they were given gender-neutral pseudonyms. All audio recordings were stored in a password protected storage form. All consent forms were placed under lock and key in the researcher’s office. A formal committee approved the research proposal, and approval from the IRB was obtained before conducting the research. Participants were informed that due to the small sample size and specific geographical
requirements of the study, the participants may be able to identify themselves, others, or places in written reports or published works. Participants were respected and not pressured or harmed.

The background notes were recorded in the form of field notes. Field notes are notes taken during the process of qualitative research. These notes focused on physical environments, real-world events, and human actions. The process used for the field notes was recommended by Mulhall and allowed the interviewer to remain an active participant in the collection and interpretation of knowledge (Mulhall, 2003, p. 309). Attention to the form, meaning, use and construction of field notes enabled the researcher to better analyze the context of the interviews. Field notes included the following: (1) people – how they behaved, dressed, interacted, moved; (2) the daily process of activities; structural and organizational features – what the building and environment looked like and how they were used.; (3) any special events that occurred such as meetings, interruptions to the interview; (4) dialogue; (5) an everyday diary of events as they occurred both in the field and before entering the field; (6) a personal and reflective diary which included my thoughts about entering the field and being there, and reflections on my life experiences that might have influenced the way in which I interpreted what was observed (Mulhall, 2003). A guide for field notes is included in Appendix B.

After each interview, the field notes were expanded and completed. Detail was added to the key thoughts and the responses. After transferring all data to written form, I conducted multiple readings of all materials and then themes and patterns that emerged were organized into categories to make connections between the observational data and the research questions.

Corbin and Strauss’s constant comparative method was used to analyze the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The constant comparative method involves an ongoing cycling between data collection and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This allows for the development of new
insights and is an important mechanism in building credibility in the findings. The constant comparative method meant I began with a rough idea about what I wanted to learn from the empirical world. This process was continually revised, modified, and amended until all new units could be placed into appropriate categories and the inclusion of additional units into a category provided no new information.

Analysis was accomplished by identifying the smallest piece of data whose meaning was relevant to the research and could stand on its own. The consistency of the findings was constantly checked and rechecked or triangulated. This aided in establishing converging lines of evidence to make the findings as robust as possible. Open coding was employed to develop preliminary themes that guided initial examination of the data. Open coding enabled me to view patterns in the data and identify themes and categories.

I then moved to a focused coding analysis. This analysis enabled me to center on themes identified in the open-coding phase. The focused coding was completed by sorting the word-processed phrases into themes identified in the open coding process and physically placing them into categories. Additional understanding and insight of the participant experience was provided by both existing literature and document analysis in the area of inquiry. Each piece of information was analyzed and compared with earlier findings about the topic which led to further development of the topic. Credibility in the interpretation of the researcher was established by combining the insights of the different methods and data sources. I determined whether or not to continue to focus on a particular topic based on whether new ideas kept arising in the data or did not arise. This was the theoretical saturation. The credibility of the research process established the credibility of the findings.
**Researcher’s Role**

Qualitative researchers, as Creswell (2013) stated, collect data themselves through the examination of behavior, examination of documents, or interviews with participants. The researcher is the main instrument for data collection and data analysis and, also, the primary investigator (PI) who established the trust and developed relationships with the participants. The PI was courteous and professional as well as engaged and interested in the information that participants shared without expressing feelings regarding the content of their thoughts (Creswell, 2003). This closely-examined information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them act and behave within their environment is a major characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Through this process the PI was aware that each participant contributed information, gave time, and supplied assistance with the research and was grateful for their participation in the study.

**Research Settings – School Districts**

Prior to the IRB application approval process, the superintendent of the now-consolidated Unity School District was contacted regarding a willingness to have the institution participate in this study. Permission was granted by the superintendent of the school district via personal communication with the researcher. IRB approval was obtained prior to the researcher making other contacts with individuals.

**Generalized Description**

The research sites utilized in the study involved two different school districts located in the same geographical location within the continental United States of America which consolidated into one school district. One school district is referred to as East Community School District and the other school district is referred to as West Community School District. The consolidated school district is referred to as Unity Community School District. The research
sites were prekindergarten through twelfth grade public institutions. This section gives a
generalized description of the two school districts examined in the case study. The participating
sites had the following general, student, academic, activities, and faculty demographics (Iowa
Department of Education Statistics, 2017):

- Rural student population
- Multiple communities located within each school district
- School buildings located in some communities of the school district and other
  communities within the school district were without a school building. One or more
  school buildings within the school district were also located in a country setting rather
  than within the city limits of a community.
- Student enrollment for the school district ranged from 100 to 1,500 students.
- 25 to 75 percent of the students were female.
- 25 to 75 percent of the students were male.
- 50 to 99 percent of the students were White (not Hispanic).
- Student-to-faculty ratio ranged from 5:1 to 20:1.
- 5 to 20 percent of the students received special education services.
- 10 to 100 percent of the students participated in at least one athletic extra-curricular
  activity.
- 10 to 100 percent of the students participated in at least one nonathletic extra-
  curricular activity.

The following section gives additional information about the two school districts that was
pertinent to the research.
**East Community School District**

East Community School District was a rural school district located in the Midwest. East Community School District had been involved since 2013 in a whole grade sharing agreement that resulted in school consolidation in 2018. The consolidation plan began with whole grade sharing between two school districts and moved to consolidation between the two school districts after six-years involved in whole grade sharing. The 2018-2019 school year was the first year of consolidation. This is the second time consolidation has happened for this school district within the school’s history.

**West Community School District**

West Community School District was a rural school district located in the Midwest. West Community School District had been involved since 2013 in a whole grade sharing agreement that resulted in school consolidation in 2018. The consolidation plan began with whole grade sharing between two school districts and moved to consolidation between the two school districts after six-years involved in whole grade sharing. The 2018-2019 school year was the first year of consolidation. This is the second time consolidation has happened for this school district within the school’s history.

**Unity Community School District**

Unity Community School District was formed in 2013 when East Community School District and West Community School District entered into a whole grade sharing agreement. The District began with each district maintaining pre-kindergarten through sixth grade and combining grades 7-12. There were three attendance centers for elementary students with two of the attendance centers located in the former West Community School District and one attendance center in the former East Community School District. The middle school students, configured as seventh and eighth grade, had their attendance center in a building in the former East Community
School District. The high school students, configured as ninth through twelfth grade, had their attendance center in a building in the former West Community School District.

The time period of whole grade sharing involved East Community School District and West Community School District each still maintaining independent school districts for some operations such as having their own Board of Educations and contracts. There was also some sharing between the two school districts during the whole grade sharing time period, including operational sharing. This included the sharing of managerial personnel in the discrete operational function areas of superintendent management, business management, human resource management, student transportation management, and facility maintenance management. Unity Community School District benefited from the Iowa Department of Education offered incentives to make sharing agreements attractive to school districts.

Following six years of whole grade sharing (Fall 2013-Fall 2018), Unity Community School District became a consolidated school district beginning in the Fall of 2018. A Board of Directors for Unity Community School District was elected in November 2018. This seven-member Board replaced the Board of Directors for each of the respective districts which had been maintained throughout the whole grade sharing agreement and these two respective Boards were dissolved as consolidation commenced.

### Table 3.1 Timeline of school reorganization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>School(s) Involved</th>
<th>Issue/Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011-early 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Superintendent and School Board of East Community School District discussed school finances and projection. Options for the future of East Community School District included single-section independent district, sharing programs/staff, whole grade sharing, charter school, other innovative ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Work sessions of School Board. Ad hoc committees formed to investigate options including potential sharing, remaining independent district, charter school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Research done on options including a feasibility study facilitated by Dept. of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Attendance at Board meetings included many visitors. Board meetings needed to be moved to gymnasium to accommodate the visitors to the meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Letters sent to four neighboring school districts to determine interest in discussing potential sharing opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>School(s) Involved</td>
<td>Issue/Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 14, 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District</td>
<td>Special meeting of Board of Directors to discuss invitation from East Community School District regarding interest in sharing programs in future years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District</td>
<td>Work session of Board of Directors to explore the levels of sharing opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Educational Program Ad Hoc Committee formed with 31 members representing school board, teachers, coaches, support staff, high school and middle school students, school improvement committee membership, and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Written responses received from four neighboring school districts and joint work sessions held with three of the four neighboring school districts which had expressed interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 21, 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District and East Community School District</td>
<td>School Boards of each district held a joint meeting to discuss potential future sharing opportunities. West Community School District indicated strong desire to investigate any types of sharing opportunities, up to and including whole grade sharing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District</td>
<td>Indicated intent to pursue whole grade sharing for the 2013-2014 school year. The West Community School District School Board approved a resolution to pursue a whole grade sharing agreement with East Community School District for the 2013-2014 school year. This was only school of the four neighboring district to pursue the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 11, 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Educational Program Ad Hoc Committee recommended to formally pursue whole grade sharing options for the 2013-2014 school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 17, 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>Board of Directors accepted and approved the Ad Hoc Committee’s recommendation to formally pursue whole grade sharing for 2013-2014. An invitation was sent to West Community School District as one of the potential partners for a whole grade sharing arrangement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 8, 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District</td>
<td>Board of Directors held a special meeting to consider whether to pass a resolution of intent to pursue whole gradesSharing with East Community School District for 2013-2014. Superintendent presented supporting arguments for reasons to pursue whole grade sharing. Enrollment decline continues, secondary offerings jeopardized, East School District best option geographically, avoid financial difficulties with underused facilities Benefits: HS enrollment sufficient to maintain/expand curriculum offerings, maintain/expand extra-curricular offerings, maintain/expand co-curricular offerings, improve services for special programs, increase financial stability, better facilities for middle school students Disadvantages: Loss of autonomy and identity, transportation costs, staffing changes, some students farther from home West Community School District voted unanimously to announce their intent to negotiate a whole grade sharing agreement with East Community School District.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District</td>
<td>The East Community School District School Board approved a resolution to pursue a whole grade sharing agreement with West Community School District for the 2013-2014 school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Superintendent of East Community School District and Superintendent of West Community School District</td>
<td>Exploring next steps for the school boards to consider in developing a draft Whole Grade Sharing 28E Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 15, 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District and East Community School District</td>
<td>Schools collaborated to appoint ad hoc committees for student policies (24 members), academic alignment (38 members), extra-curricular activities (14 members) and district committees for finance (6 members), calendar and logistics (12 members) and conflict resolution (6 members) for the purpose of making recommendations to the School Board. Ad Hoc Committee members will be assigned by a committee of Board members and administration from recruited and self-identified volunteers including students and community members. District committees include staff members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District and East Community School District</td>
<td>Joint School Board Work Session and initial meeting for Whole Grade Sharing Ad Hoc Committee comprised of members from both school districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District and East Community School District</td>
<td>A whole grade sharing online information page shared by both districts to gather questions and share information. Survey for name, colors, and mascot posted on information page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2012</td>
<td>West Community School District and East Community School District</td>
<td>Joint work session with Boards of Education to review and discuss the first draft of the Whole Grade Sharing Agreement. The following issues remained unresolved: combined district calendars, student transition between buildings, course offerings and staffing, good conduct and attendance policies, honors and awards, student traditions, name/mascot/colors. Decision made to form a study committee with equal representation from both districts to make further detailed recommendations to the Boards of Education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>School(s) Involved</td>
<td>Issues/Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 17, 2012</td>
<td>East Community School District and West Community School District</td>
<td>Public hearing held by each respective school district regarding the resolution of intent to whole grade share for the 2013-2014 school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 21, 2013</td>
<td>East Community School District and West Community School District</td>
<td>Official vote on Whole Grade Sharing Agreement. The Board of Directors of each school district approved the Whole Grade Sharing Agreement. Unity Community School District will be in operation in Fall 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late January 2013</td>
<td>East Community School District and West Community School District</td>
<td>Joint departmental meetings held</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1, 2013</td>
<td>East Community School District and West Community School District</td>
<td>Deadline to sign a Whole Grade Sharing Agreement. Deadline was met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>East Community School District and West Community School District</td>
<td>Joint work session of both Board of Directors. Approval of new school colors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>East Community School District and West Community School District</td>
<td>Superintendent of East Community School District retires and Superintendent of West Community School District will be a shared superintendent for the two districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2013-June 2016</td>
<td>Unity Community School District and East Community School District</td>
<td>Whole Grade Sharing Agreement in effect. Terms included each district maintaining pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, grades 7-12 combined. The West Community School District and the East Community School District each retain a Board of Directors but joint meetings of the two Boards are held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2016</td>
<td>Unity Community School District</td>
<td>Whole grade sharing extended and in effect through 2017-2018 school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>Unity Community School District</td>
<td>Official vote on school consolidation. 97% approval from West Community School District and 94% approval from East Community School District.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2018</td>
<td>Unity Community School District</td>
<td>Unity Community School District is a consolidated school district.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants**

The participants interviewed in the case study and the generalized description given adhered to the guidelines outlined in the IRB application. The participants had the following general characteristics and these characteristics contributed to the social capital typically found in the geographic area of the study.

* All participants were high school graduates. Some may have higher education degrees ranging from associate of arts degree to doctorate degrees.

* Participants have lived in the Midwest for a majority of their lives.

* Participants have lived within the school districts studied for a minimum of five years.
* Some participants have children who had been or are students in the school districts studied.

* All participants have been long-time residents of geographic areas considered rural.

* Alumni students had graduated from high school in 2013 or 2014 and were students of one of the school districts during the last five years of their K-12 education.

**Goodness and Trustworthiness**

Goodness and trustworthiness was ensured through the employment of strategies as provided by Merriam (2002) and Anafara, Brown, and Mangione (2002). The researcher applied triangulation, used peer review, employed a reflexivity component, gave adequate engagement in data collection, read research by others, and provided the reader with interview questions.

Triangulation refers to the use of “multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305) to collect and interpret data. Triangulation was achieved in the study by utilizing multiple sources of data including six interview participants and multiple sources of collection methods (interviews, observations, artifacts). Data from each source were compared to data from other sources, which allowed for the verification, clarification, and amplification of the meaning of the findings from each source and particular perceptions. Triangulation, or establishing converging lines of evidence, helped make the findings as robust as possible.

Peer review involved collegial discussions concerning the study’s process, findings, and interpretations in the manner in which Merriam (2002) described peer review or peer examination. The researcher engaged two higher education colleagues at the researcher’s current place of employment to serve as peer reviewers. The peer reviewers, both graduates of doctoral programs, read drafts of each of the dissertation chapters and provided feedback. Peer reviewers also reviewed field notes as time allowed to corroborate the interpretation of the researcher. Issues of concern were addressed, and changes were made as called for by the peer reviewers.
Having the input of these two individuals was important to further ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study.

Rich, thick descriptions are essential to the goodness and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Merriam (2002) propounded that the research document must contain description that enables the reader to match the research situation to the context and, also, transfer the findings. Merriam (2002) also stated the researcher needs to be familiar with the literature that already exists around the question being investigated. The researcher was immersed in the literature throughout the writing process.

Reflexivity is a research strategy whereby the investigator provides a self-reflection concerning the research process which subsequently enables others to better comprehend how the researcher interpreted the data (Merriam, 2002). This enabled a critical self-reflection regarding the presence of bias, assumptions, or other aspects that may have had an effect on the investigative findings to be identified and properly addressed.

Adequate engagement in data collection is a strategy where the researcher affords adequate time in the process of data collection (Merriam, 2002). The researcher spent adequate time in the field which enabled the researcher to partake in the collection of data and the saturation of said data. A great deal of time was invested and expended in securing and reviewing interview transcripts, artifacts, and digital audio-recordings which allowed data saturation to occur.

Providing interview questions to the reader was another strategy the researcher used. Anafara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) stated that rarely is there evidence of exactly how the interview questions were achieved and rarely are the readers privy to the interview protocol that
may be used to collect the data. A copy of the Interview Guide (Esterberg, 2002) which contains the interview questions can be found at Appendix B.

**Ensuring Trustworthy and Authentic Research**

The researcher used several methods to promote goodness and trustworthiness in the study methods. Triangulation was used with the different sources of data. These data sources included the interviews, background notes, and archival documents. Another method used was member checking at the end of each interview. The participants checked the transcription for accuracy of content. This method allowed the participant to correct any errors in interpretations or volunteer any additional information. A third method was peer review which involved discussions with colleagues regarding the process of the study and a review of tentative interpretations. A fourth method used to promote goodness and trustworthiness was ensuring adequate engagement in data collection. Saturation of information was accomplished when no new information was forthcoming and there was a redundancy of information. When participants in the interviews were asked if they had anything else to add to the interview and no new information was offered, it was known that saturation of information had been achieved. Finally, to enhance the rigor of the study, the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the information to contextualize the findings of the study to promote transferability to similar situations.

**Fairness**

This dissertation sought to gain understanding through the integrations of multiple participant perspectives and sources of data relating to the case study. As Merriam (2002) stated, the qualitative research needs to enable positive action, or it fails to be meaningful. The research has catalytic authenticity because it encourages changes in practice. The research also has tactical authenticity because it leads all participants to feel empowered to act.
IRB Process

The Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) gave approval for the study to be completed. The researcher was concerned about the limitations to confidentiality when the results of the study would be reported due to the small size of the sample (six interview participants). To make it less likely to determine the identity of the institutions and the identity of the participants and to have the participants understand it may not be possible to ensure complete confidentiality, the following measures were taken: (1) Participants were presented the risks related to the lack of confidentiality (e.g., possible harm to their reputation, employment situation, or embarrassment if they disclosed negative opinions about community/their institution); (2) All institutions, places and participants were given pseudonyms and the pseudonyms for participants were androgynous to avoid identification by gender; (3) From the outset of the study, participants were well-informed of both what the study would require of them and how their responses, and the data more broadly, were to be used and distributed; (4) When describing participant sites and participants, the researcher generalized institutional information and background information to capture the essence of each of the school districts and participants without providing such a level of specificity that would compromise their identity; (5) Informed consent was an ongoing process with the informed consent form reviewed prior to the first interview, prior to the second interview, and at the end of the second interview; and (6) Participants were not referred to by gender-specific pronouns (e.g., “he” or “she”).

Delimitations

Because of the emphasis put on the study’s possible practical value, the investigation was purposely delimited to the two school districts in order to serve the following purpose: to help school district decision-making officials to clearly and concisely determine the role identity played in affecting the success or failure of the consolidated school district. Delimitations for the
study were primarily driven by the selection of participants. The participants selected included a sampling of administrators, alumni students and community members. The limited number of participants interviewed may limited the ability to generalize findings to all school districts.

**Limitations**

This study’s primary limitation was that it is a case study involving two rural Midwestern school districts which have consolidated into one school district. The locally grounded nature of case study research provided rich context and insight into participant experiences and sense making. Findings are primarily indicative of the study area and are only logically generalizable to other locations and populations. This may limit the transferability of the study.

Another limitation of this study that should be noted is the investigation’s nature as a case study addressing school district consolidation in only one state: Iowa. Inferences drawn essentially apply to the state in which the rural schools are located. Results cannot be readily generalized to rural school districts in other states.

A third limitation that also should be noted is that the investigation is limited to the rural school consolidation decision-making time period. Inferences drawn essentially apply only to the particular time period. Results cannot be readily generalized to future time periods due to constantly changing conditions which may affect rural school consolidation efforts.

Participants in this case study were limited to the superintendent, school board president, alumni students, and community members. No faculty or staff participated in the study. Some of the findings may have been different if faculty or staff had participated in the study.

Findings were framed by the researcher’s theoretical perspective of rural and the conclusions were limited to the rural population meeting the applied definition of rural. The results may not be the same in urban, suburban or even other rural schools if a different definition of rural is applied.
Also, according to Chapman, external factors greatly affect an institution’s performance which can hide the true cause of positive or negative results (2007). Because of the frequency and scale of changes that are part of an institution, it can be difficult to attribute a cause to an outcome.

**Summary of Chapter Three**

This chapter focused on the methodology for the investigation of the role of school identity during the consideration of rural school consolidation. Observations with field notes, interviews, and archival documents were reviewed and coded in this case study. Six participants were selected for the interviews. It was the goal of the researcher to provide school districts considering reorganization or consolidation with a framework to help in addressing the issue of school identity in the process of school consolidation.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings related to this study of the role of identity during school consolidation in a rural environment, using the study participants’ words to substantiate the findings. The chapter will begin with a description of the cases and the participants and then continues with a review of the purpose and coding structure used. The perceptions of the six participants on school consolidation are described to form a foundational understanding of the findings. Based on this understanding, findings for the research questions are provided, capturing the essence of experience for these participants in the context of the school consolidation process.

Description of Cases

The case serves as the main unit of analysis in a case study. A “case”, in case study, is generally a bounded entity (a person, event, behavioral organization, organization, or other social phenomenon), but the division between the case and its contextual conditions may be not easily distinguished. The researcher needs to define what makes a case special. Some elements that make the cases selected for this study special include: the revival or renewal of a major organization, the discovery of a new way of conducting business, a dramatic change, and a critical decision.

Two school districts which became one consolidated school district were selected for the case study. The school districts are described with the intent of discovering the macrosystem of each. Data gathered from multiple in-depth interviews with stakeholders at the school districts provided descriptive accounts and observations. Documents that included school board minutes and committee meeting minutes relating to the school districts further informed these descriptions. In an attempt to protect the confidentiality of each study participant to the greatest
extent possible, participants and school districts in the study were assigned pseudonyms and some information was generalized.

**East Community School District**

East Community School District was a rural school district located in the Midwest. The school district was comprised of three rural communities. Prior to the most recent consolidation, the school district educated prekindergarten through 12th grade students and had one building for all students in the district. The school building was at a rural location which is two miles from one community and two miles from another community and included an early childhood and elementary learning center. The student population of the school district was approximately 500 students prior to whole grade sharing and consolidation and creation of the Unity Community School District. Previously, the three communities consolidated in the late 1950’s to form a new school district. The school district name chosen at that time was a newly selected name to represent the geographic location of the school.

**West Community School District**

West Community School District was a rural school district located in the Midwest. The school district was comprised of four communities with one of the communities being larger than the other three communities. The school buildings were located in two of the communities with the middle school and high school in the largest of the two communities and elementary buildings in each of the two communities. The school district had an enrollment of approximately 1,000 students prior to whole grade sharing and consolidation and creation of the Unity Community School District. Previously, in the mid 1980’s, the school district experienced a consolidation when two geographically neighboring district merged to create one district. The name of the newly formed school district was a compilation of the two names of the separate school districts.
Unity Community School District

The groundwork for this school district was created in February 2013 when the decision to whole grade share for three years morphed into a five-year commitment due to overwhelming support of students, parents, and patrons of the East Community School District and the West Community School District. The extension from the original three year plan to whole grade share to a five year plan allowed the school district to maximize use of state-supported funding for whole grade sharing agreements. The school was renamed the Unity Community School District in 2013 when the whole grade sharing was approved. Reconfiguration of grades occurred, and four buildings were used for attendance centers with three of the buildings in the former West Community School District and one building in the former East Community School District. Although the school district was publicly known as Unity Community School District beginning in 2013, the two districts, West Community School District and East Community School District, each did retain an identity for financial reasons until full consolidation occurred.

Following the initial three years of whole grade sharing, a Citizens Advisory Committee formed in 2016 to review plans for school consolidation. A vote for the school districts to be reorganized was held in February of 2017. The resolution to reorganize and become the consolidated Unity School District was passed in both districts, East Community School District and West Community School Districts, with 95 percent approval.

Participants

The participant selection for this study attempted to identify participants representing multiple typical Midwestern rural contexts. In addition, for the purposes of this study, with some of the participant roles being identifiable to an individual and the need for maintaining confidentiality, participant contexts and experiences were described using position rather than name. Participants in the case study were the Superintendent, School Board President,
community members from each school district involved in the consolidation process, and alumni students from each school district involved in the consolidation process. Based on their backgrounds and experiences, all participants brought diverse perspectives to the conversations.

In an attempt to protect the confidentiality of each study participant to the greatest extent possible, pseudonyms were used. Facts that may have further revealed the identity of each study participant were either altered or omitted. These steps made it more comfortable for study participants to participate in this study. It is noteworthy, however, that study participants were not concerned about anonymity. Following the procedure outlined in the IRB approval process, the consent forms were signed by the participants prior to the first interview and again prior to the second interview. None of the participants hesitated or asked questions about confidentiality when asked to sign the consent forms. Furthermore, when transcription was reviewed by the study participants, only two pieces of information were deleted or edited from the 285 pages of transcription. These two pieces of information concerned a personal fact about a child and the corrected spelling of a name.

The six participants are presented through narrative descriptions and their own words that emerged through the coding process. For the purpose of this analysis and due to the limitations of this study, it is not possible to provide deep analysis of each individual statement supporting the key findings and associated sub-categories; therefore, the study attempts to use quotations from the participants that best highlight the overarching themes of the interviews of all six participants and are most closely aligned with the framework. The meaning making associated with the responses of the participants are found in the themes that emerged during the data collection and analysis process completed for this study.
This chapter describes information about the six participants who were active participants in the school consolidation process. Each study participants’ description was gleaned from the in-depth interviews and observations. Superintendent Brown, School Board President Adams, Community Member Jones, Community Member Smith, Alumni Student Wilson, and Alumni Student Davis all attributed importance to the developmental influence of the school consolidation process, stating that it helped define and contribute to their present identity. This more cognitive attribution of importance to the developmental influence of the school consolidation process was different from participants’ descriptions of their overall attitude toward the school. These descriptions had an emotional intensity with the school being the place of memories and traditions.

The themes of recollections of changing identity during the school consolidation process were captured in excerpts from participants’ accounts. Participants identified with the school in different ways and this identification contributes to the connectedness that is part of the rural culture. In Table 4.1, I indicate how study participants had some similar factors in their backgrounds as well as some distinct factors.

Table 4.1 Backgrounds of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Supt. Brown</th>
<th>School Board President Adams</th>
<th>Community Member Jones</th>
<th>Community Member Smith</th>
<th>Alumni Student Wilson</th>
<th>Alumni Student Davis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lived in Midwest for more than 10 years</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived in rural community for majority of life</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived in school district for more than 10 years</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other generations of family have attended one of the two school districts</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated from East Community School District, West Community School District or Unity Community School District</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Graduate – Bachelor’s degree or beyond</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presently live in school district</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served on committee(s) during Whole Grade Sharing process</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Superintendent Brown

The first study participant I interviewed was Superintendent Brown. The superintendent was 61 years old and had been raised in a Midwestern rural community. The superintendent had lived in three Midwestern states and had served as a school superintendent for 16 years for various schools. We met in the office of the superintendent at the former West Community School District location for both of the two interviews and there were multiple interruptions during both of the two interviews in the form of phone calls, a building principal needing to ask a question, and music coming through the wall since a practice room for band students was just outside the office. When I remarked on the music, Superintendent Brown nonchalantly and with a smile said, “There’s a closet right back there that they use to practice in. Third quarter is individual contest time so…..(pause) we listen to a lot of music.” Both interviews needed to be rescheduled from original dates and times due to the many blizzards experienced by the Midwest during the Winter of 2019. It was evident, through the phone calls and interruptions that happened during the two interviews, that a superintendent’s job can be even more arduous when inclement weather occurs. Superintendent Brown was relaxed and composed during both interviews. Throughout the two interviews, I was aware Superintendent Brown was conscious of a superintendent’s responsibilities to the students, families, and employees of the district since Superintendent Brown’s cell phone sat on the table during the interview and Superintendent Brown occasionally glanced at it.

The superintendent no longer lived in the Unity Community School District but had lived in the District for most of the nine years of employment with the District. During the first interview, the superintendent wore a sweater which had the emblem of the school on the breast pocket. For both of the two interviews, the superintendent sat across from me at the office’s large conference table. The superintendent maintained two offices in the Unity Community
School District—one at the high school location and one at the middle school location. This provided an office within the former West Community School District and an office within the former East Community School District. I arrived at both interviews before Superintendent Brown and was greeted warmly by the two office workers who asked if I wanted coffee prior to escorting me to the meeting room.

The superintendent was comfortable in demeanor for both interviews and expressed enthusiasm about participating in the study. During each interview, Superintendent Brown repeatedly expressed appreciation for the time and efforts of the committee members and others who had worked on the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process. There were frequent references made to the involvement of students on committees and the solicitation of student opinion.

**Community Member Jones**

Community Member Jones was the second person I interviewed. Community Member Jones had lived in the Midwest since birth and was now 54 years old. At the request of Community Member Jones, our meeting was held in a private office at the workplace of Community Member Jones. Community Member Jones was an active volunteer at the school, a former business owner in the community, a property owner within the school district and a parent of children who had graduated from the school. Community Member Jones had been an active committee member for numerous school committees over the years as a resident in the district and had served on various committees concerned with the school whole-grade sharing and consolidation process. Specifically Community Member Jones had served on the initial policy committee, as co-chair of the citizens advisory committee, and was currently on the school improvement advisory committee. As co-chair of the citizens advisory committee, Community Member Jones had helped gather signatures on the petition in order to move forward
with the consolidation process. It was proudly stated, “There were 800 signatures needed and 1,000 were gathered and, when the vote was taken, 97% of [West Community School District] approved and 94% of [East Community School District] approved the merger.”

As we talked during each interview, Community Member Jones calmly sat across from me with a desk between us and maintained constant eye contact. During both interviews, Community Member Jones was dressed in dark slacks and a light jacket bearing the logo of the workplace of Community Member Jones. Smiling occasionally, Community Member Jones was reflective in the responses with occasional pauses to gather thoughts. Throughout the two interviews, Community Member Jones was articulate about the process, used data occasionally to illustrate points, and was pleased to be able to share the perceived positive way the process had been handled. The interviews seemed to be conversations and ones that Community Member Jones enjoyed since it gave an opportunity to express appreciation for the superintendent’s leadership and the work of the various committee members and, especially, the work of the students.

**Community Member Smith**

Community Member Smith was the third person I interviewed. We met in my office at my place of work for both interviews at the request of Community Member Smith. Relaxed in demeanor, Community Member Smith was upbeat during the interviews and seemed to enjoy talking about the school and especially about the role of family members in helping make a perceived positive transition to a consolidated school district. Community Member Smith had lived in a rural setting since birth and was now 56 years old. Dressed in black pants and a sweater during both interviews, Community Member Smith was not only a community member but was also a graduate of the East Community School District, a third-generation of graduates of the school, the parent to three graduates of the school, the grandparent to two present students.
of the school, an active volunteer at the school, a property owner in the school district, and a former employee of the school. Community Member Smith also had two family members, a daughter and spouse, who were presently employed as teachers at the school.

When asked about involvement in the school consolidation process, Community Member Smith mentioned that “maybe I was a bystander to the process but I knew all of the information as it was happening due to family members who were involved.” Throughout the two interviews, Community Member Smith reflected frequently on how there are social changes over the years as the children in a family go through school and the happenings at school can be a frequent topic of conversation. Community Member Smith said the daughter, who was a teacher in the district, was the family member “who was the most forward thinking as to seeing the benefit for the students.”

It was shared that the issue of the school consolidation process continues to be a main topic of conversation within social and family gatherings. The conversations usually center on a topic that has developed due to a change in a procedure or a potential staffing change. To contribute to these conversations, Community Member Smith takes the stance to be a listener.

**Alumni Student Wilson**

Alumni Student Wilson was the fourth person I interviewed. Alumni Student Wilson was 23 years old and had graduated from high school in 2013. This was the last graduating class for East Community School District. We met for both interviews in the breakroom of an automotive shop at Alumni Student Wilson’s place of work. During both interviews there was a constant background noise of vehicle engines and equipment, which Alumni Student Wilson apologized for early in each of the two interviews. The background noise became incidental within minutes of the beginning of each interview as Alumni Student Wilson became more involved in the questions and the recall of memories. Alumni Student Wilson, who was wearing khaki pants and
a shirt displaying the logo of the workplace of Alumni Student Wilson during each interview, was hesitant in the initial minutes of each interview but quickly became at ease as the focus shifted to the interview questions and the sharing of information.

Alumni Student Wilson was a third-generation graduate of the school and had been born and raised in the community and continued to reside in the community. During the first interview, Alumni Student Wilson mainly responded to my initial questions with fairly short answers and did not have many additional thoughts or questions to ask. There were some moments, especially in the first interview, where Alumni Student Wilson expressed regret that the responses were not more detailed or emotional. I assured Alumni Student Wilson that there were no expectations on my part for how the questions would be answered and the responses shared were providing information to help with the investigation. This seemed to bring a level of comfort and the answers to the questions became more detailed as the interview continued.

Alumni Student Wilson struggled to recall specific involvement with the school consolidation process and said, “For my class, the class of 2013, I guess we didn’t have a whole lot to do with it.” Alumni Student Wilson remembered “they were looking for one person or a few people from the class ahead, to give ideas maybe. But we really just kind of got left out of it. I was just a member of the last class to graduate.”

Prior to the questions being posed and at the beginning of the second interview, Alumni Student Wilson was interested in knowing more about the process of the dissertation work and asked how the interview responses would be used. These questions were centered on wanting to understand the investigation process rather than being anxious about responses to the interview questions or feeling threatened by the process. The second interview resulted in lengthier responses to the interview questions.
Alumni Student Davis

Alumni Student Davis was the fifth person I interviewed. Alumni Student Davis was 21 years old and had graduated from high school in 2015. This was the first graduating class of the newly formed Unity Community School District and Alumni Student Davis had attended East Community School District prior to the forming of Unity Community School District. Since Alumni Student Davis was attending college a distance from my location and had a busy schedule, this had been a difficult interview to arrange and involved many emails and phone calls to find a time to talk for the necessary amount of time. We finally made arrangements for a phone interview. When the first interview was taking place, Alumni Student Davis seemed impatient at the beginning and within a few minutes began to relax and seemed to enjoy responding to the questions. A blizzard was occurring at both the interviewer and interviewee’s location so events had been cancelled and that allowed for uninterrupted schedules.

Alumni Student Davis was graduating from college in a few weeks at the time of the interview and shared there were no plans to return to a rural community. In fact, Alumni Student Davis shared there were explicit plans to not return to a rural community since the desire was for more urban amenities and activities. Alumni Student Davis commented, “I have only been home four times in the last four or five years.”

Alumni Student Davis had lived in the Midwest since birth and had moved to a community within the West Community School District when in first grade and had two younger siblings who also attended the school district which is now Unity Community School District. School involvement had included band, athletics, and drama activities. When asked about involvement in school consolidation activities, Alumni Student Davis said, “I am just a previous alumni” and this thought of putting the events into past rather than the present as well as minimizing the role played in the process was evident throughout the comments of Alumni
Student Davis. A review of archival documents showed Alumni Student Davis served on the 38-member Academic Alignment Ad Hoc Committee but yet no reference was made to this committee membership by Alumni Student Davis during either of the two interviews. There was a perceived positive outcome of the whole grade sharing process and it was expressed in numerous ways throughout the two interviews. The identity of Alumni Student Davis was more grounded in what was happening currently in the soon-to-be college graduate’s life than what had happened in the past.

**School Board President Adams**

School Board President Adams was the last participant I interviewed. It had been difficult to arrange schedules with School Board President Adams’ work, volunteer, and family schedule. School Board President Adams met me at my office since my office was on the route from home to workplace for School Board President Adams. At the time of the interview, School Board President Adams was 41 years old and had completed most of the coursework for a Bachelor’s degree. It was proudly stated that the completion of an internship was all that was needed for the degree to be completed.

School Board President Adams had been raised in the Midwest and had graduated from East Community School District. In addition to being a graduate of East Community School District, there was pride in mentioning that serving as student body president while a high school senior and being the speaker at the high school commencement ceremony had also been part of School Board President Adam’s background. These comments were shared though there was not a specific question asked about high school activities.

Furthermore, School Board President Adams said many relatives had also graduated from the school including parents, in-laws, siblings, and spouse. School Board President Adams brought notes to the first interview session with the graduation dates of family members from
East Community School District. There were more than ten names on the list and additional information was shared beyond graduation dates including the fact some family members had graduated in the same year. School Board President Adams had children currently attending Unity Community School District. When asked if connections existed with employees of the Unity Community School District, School Board President Adams responded that there were relationships with about 50 percent of the employees and that “I have had a relationship with them for most of my life.”

Casually dressed in jeans and a long sleeve shirt for the first interview, School Board President Adams approached both of the two interviews with an initial quietness that quickly turned to an easiness that resulted in thorough responses to the questions. Often, School Board President Adams extended the responses beyond the asked question. There was an eagerness to participate in the two interviews and this eagerness consistently grew as each of the two interviews proceeded.

**Reflecting back and mindful of rural environment.**

Superintendent Brown, Community Member Jones, Community Member Smith, Alumni Student Wilson, Alumni Student Davis, and School Board President Adams were six individuals who identified several dominant factors as they experienced the school consolidation process. The human capital, cultural capital, and social capital concepts were prevalent as the participants had sought to make sense of the process. All participants shared the understanding that school consolidation was not as simple as reviewing budgets and facilities, making a decision, and moving forward with that decision. The comments of the participants revealed residents of rural communities value the local school and what it represents and that feeling of value needed to be recognized as changes in the school are considered.
These skills and properties attributable to rural people warranted attention since they had a role in shaping cognition through forming the physical landscape, through interpretation of the landscape, and in favoring certain experiences over others. As rural people themselves, the responses of the participants to the school consolidation process indicated how they are conditioned, as rural people tend to be, to use retrospect to get a sense of direction. They consistently showed how they, as rural people, were resilient, strove for credibility, made do, and kept showing up even when they felt defeated or harmed.

The participants related their experiences and, most importantly, reflected on how the flow of experience had led to understanding at the end.

![Diagram of factors common to rural individuals]

**Figure 4.1** Factors common to rural individuals

*Conditioned to use retrospect to get a sense of direction / motivation.*

The participants shared that when opportunity is present, it is wise to take action or at least give very serious consideration to taking action since the opportunity may not ever present...
itself again. The timing may not be quite right and there may be other factors that make the opportunity not highly desirable, but the opportunity needs to be viewed from the perspective that the potential for consolidation is an opportunity that does not arise frequently.

It was noted by the participants that all stakeholders were not as mindful of the need to respond to opportunity or even desired to respond to opportunity but all participants did acknowledge opportunity for change is not always available. There was also the knowledge that when opportunity presents itself, it can be motivation to take action that otherwise may not have been considered.

Motivation for the participants also came from the knowledge gained through previous negative experiences. There was the challenge to avoid the pitfalls experienced by others. Superintendent Brown shared a previous experience while serving as a superintendent at another school district had given insight into the need to make sure constituent voices are heard and that there is an ongoing way for those voices to be heard. It was stressed that stakeholders need to reach agreement on the “concept of becoming a partnership.” Community Member Jones identified as a person who had gone through a sharing experience as a high school student in a Midwestern school district and so was “very active and interested” in this reorganization because of that experience. Community Member Jones related that the “students got along great”, but the neighboring communities were “very upset that this [consolidation] was starting”, and it was the parents and the grandparents who were “throwing eggs, slashing tires, breaking windows, and it was not fun to go through.” It was shared that [Unity Community School District] experience was vastly different and “was a conversation and if someone disagreed, they agreed to disagree. It wasn’t a verbal altercation. It wasn’t nasty letters to the editor. It wasn’t anything remotely
close to that. It was people being professional and being visionary.” Community Member Jones described it as “a very respected and respectful process.”

This motivation to avoid the problems experienced by others encouraged the stakeholders to proceed with plans in a methodical and positive way, even though there were some problems that had to be addressed occasionally. Specifically, Superintendent Brown’s focus on the plan and the efforts to move forward with the plan continued even when questions from people arose about the relative short timeline in which to make decisions. Superintendent Brown said there was pressure to go more slowly and, as Superintendent Brown said, “Some people thought we were going too fast and wondered why we were hurrying into this. My response was that this was the best opportunity we were going to have to whole grade share because there were neighboring school districts who were interested and we were a geographic fit.” Community Member Jones shared that when West Community School District had been approached by East Community School District about whole grade sharing, there were six other school districts in the area that were asked and “they all said no, maybe next year.” Superintendent Brown made many remarks about the need to understand the process and then communicate that to the public in a short amount of time which was not typical for most school districts pursuing whole grade sharing and consolidation. Superintendent Brown knew there was a short time frame, about nine months, in which to put together the “battle language.”

Superintendent Brown described the time period of organizing and making decisions regarding the whole grade sharing as “stressful, because we had to keep people moving on it.” According to Community Member Jones, the reaction of Superintendent Brown, then the superintendent of the West Community School District only, was a calm and firm “we are
moving now” attitude and therefore, the West Community School District was able to move forward with the process knowing it was best for “down the road.”

Community Member Jones also shared similar feelings to Superintendent Brown of the perceived short timeframe by some of the process working toward whole grade sharing and then the longer time period of working toward full consolidation. It was shared that it may have seemed to some individuals that it had taken a longer time than needed to fully merge the two school districts. The longer time period had allowed the school districts to take full advantage of financial incentives offered by the state and this was communicated to the stakeholders. This effort to maximize financial opportunities was accepted by most of the rural stakeholders, who appreciated the concept of making full use of financial incentives to reduce expenses.

Financial concerns for the present and the future were motivating factors, but the participants reflected on the finances very differently. Superintendent Brown shared the incentive dollars given by the state were helpful and acknowledged the incentive dollars made the whole grade sharing attractive to many of the stakeholders, but many stakeholders were apprehensive about the increased size and perceived increased costs of the school district. “People would ask questions about well, you’ve got, ah, all this transportation cost,” Superintendent Brown recalled. As people expressed concern about the added cost of transportation, Superintendent Brown addressed how those costs would be paid by the incentive dollars “plus some.” It was related that “that’s a huge, huge thing to be able to talk to your people and say it’s not going to cost us anymore to do this, because we’re going to get more money in.” Superintendent Brown also said it was important to keep focusing on the opportunity whole grade sharing presented to remain a good-size school and keep programs. It was recalled that within a conversation with a school board member from a neighboring school district the
issue of saving money through whole grade sharing had arisen. Superintendent Brown had responded it was important to keep emphasizing “we aren’t doing this to save money, we’re doing this to have enough money to keep all of our programs. We’re doing it to save programs, not money.”

Though many comments reflected acknowledgment of the role of the superintendent and the committee members to help motivate others, credit was given mainly by Community Member Jones to the students of both the West Community School District and the East Community School District for the perceived smooth transition. Alumni Student Wilson also gave credit to the students and reflected on the number of students who had extended family in the geographic area. Alumni Student Wilson shared that in high school at the time of the last graduating class of East Community School District “it seemed like everyone had extended family in the area. I guess one family, it was two brothers, they moved in and didn’t have a connection to the area, but it was two kids. I can’t think of others.” This seemed to be a revelation to Alumni Student Wilson that most students had family connection within the community. Alumni Student Wilson shared this frequency of family connections had been a conversation topic with family members and other family members had also been surprised at the extent of family connections among the student body.

The active involvement of students was a consistent topic among the participants and, though only some students served on committees, it was felt that students were involved and encouraged others to embrace change. It was expressed by Alumni Student Davis, a member of the first graduating class of Unity Community School District, that there had not been “a whole lot of involvement [among classmates] other than just getting to be the little kind of guinea pig class [class in which to try new things and experiment with change].” Alumni Student Davis
explained that during the junior year of high school there were frequent references to their class as the guinea pig class. This had not bothered Alumni Student Davis and it was felt the references had given the class an identity. Alumni Student Davis also shared there was an awareness among the students that changes needed to be made and the environment during the process was described as “easygoing.” There was a feeling that others were waiting “to just to see how things go and how people get along and I know it was especially hard because as far as athletics and competitive things were concerned, we [West Community School District and East Community School District] were rivals.”

**Resilience / communication and trust.**

Superintendent Brown shared how it was important to listen to and understand the feelings expressed by various stakeholders but to also consistently continue to “execute the plan” as the work with the individuals and issues evolved. As Superintendent Brown shared:

> I have a wider knowledge of the people of both districts. I have had some good friends on both sides, not a lot of socialization, but you know, a lot of people that I came to know in the process. I think that the time commitment I had during the process was significant compared to running one district because I had both, you know, you have to run that district at the time and then also be thinking about [Unity Community School District] because early on we decided this looks like it’s going to work well. I had to think ahead about when we reorganize what are we going to do with this, and what are we going to do with that. And so, it was kind of a busy time not just running two districts but also planning ahead for, you know, that vision of where we all wanted to be.

It was also evident in the comments of Community Member Jones that there was a general feeling that many factors including communication were key to the perceived success. Community Member Jones shared that “patience, respect, timing, and, that there needs to be
constant communication so there is no confusion.” To do this, Community Member Jones suggested “everyone needs to be in the loop all the time” and “rumors are halted quickly. Community members, influential community members, are well-informed so they are not stirring things from the side and creating chaos where it does not need to be.” Community Member Jones also said the feeling of “one district swallowing up” the other was avoided by retention of employees. Credit was given by Community Member Jones to the “great deal of work” especially in the “very complicated, complex, and challenging” work to merge the finances of the two districts.

Community Member Jones also gave credit to Superintendent Brown for putting “the best people possible in the positions of leadership for various committees.” It was shared there was a general understanding of “we need to get through this, it’s difficult, but we know it’s best for our students in the long run and for the area in the long run. It’s the best thing to do” according to Community Member Jones.

Though Community Member Smith self-described as a bystander to the school consolidation process and shared it had not been a great deal of work personally, it was also recognized by Community Member Smith that the multi-year process had been “a great deal of work for the district and the communities, but the benefits for students outweighed the work level. Everybody’s involved in a different way and I think that everyone can see the benefits for the students.” School Board President Adams shared there were some community members who felt administration was “driving” whole grade sharing because ‘it’s going to increase the administration’s salary because they’ll have two districts to manage.” It was described as “some negativity around, it may not have been malicious, but they have their own agenda.”
Alumni Student Davis said that “communication is key as with everything else in life.” There was concern that information was not shared with students as quickly as desired and Alumni Student Davis shared that “they didn’t want to tell us until it was confirmed and happening.” This had caused some apprehension and Alumni Student Davis thought “it would have been more helpful if students could have come and sat in on meetings and say ‘well this is what I think of it and this is how I feel about it.’” Alumni Student Davis said “you can always have the big ‘adult opinions’ and think that you’re right, but you never really know what’s going on in a student’s head or in a student’s life until you have a student there.”

Although Alumni Student Davis could not think of a specific tradition which “shows how smoothly we transitioned and there was not a lot of culture shock,” there were memories shared of how “identity was a big challenge and this is where it got complicated. Besides becoming the [Unity Community School District’s mascot], other changes had to be made. The cheerleaders had to come up with new chants.” It was felt that involving as many people “that are interested in being a part of it” and communication were essential to moving forward with getting people to feel positive with the change. “There’s always people in the community that want to be a part of the change,” said School Board President Adams, “but there’s also those that are against it and having both views at the table is always a good thing. I never felt like we were keeping anything from anybody.”

School Board President Adams shared that it had been an honor to be a part of the whole grade sharing to full consolidation process. It was also apparent that it was important to School Board President Adams that the interactions with others throughout the process did not negatively affect present and future relationships. School Board President Adams shared that the “school board part wasn’t even the biggest part. It was being approached by people with their
concerns, with their questions.” School Board President Adams was pleased that people “felt comfortable coming to me cause, I mean, they’ve known me forever. They know I’m trustworthy, you know, I’m genuine, and so that was a good part of being towards, I mean working toward this goal.”

According to School Board President Adams, the School Board had been open to listening and knew the role of the School Board was to be united as a Board and not be a representative of personal feelings. School Board President Adams shared that there was a sensitivity to holding back true feelings and said “I don’t know if I was all for it in the beginning but realizing the benefits that would come from it, then I quickly kind of changed my feelings for it.” School Board President Adams did not feel these true feelings could have been initially openly expressed with people and instead chose to “listen for the main thing” and know what their concerns were, and then bring “those concerns to the work sessions and, that was basically our [School Board] job.”

Besides serving as school board president, School Board President Adams was a community member, a parent, an alumni member, a property owner and also wanted it known that “I also work outside my normal job at the local pizza place and I am also really involved in our church and so I guess I’m in the community a lot.” That recognition and public visibility was addressed many times by School Board President Adams who felt it was important that “people see me, they know me. I’m a familiar face.” School Board President Adams also shared that as an active school and community volunteer (“anything my children are involved in that they are looking for volunteers, I’m there to support”), there was opportunity for people to have conversations about school issues.
Keep showing up when feeling defeated or harmed / anxiety, uncertainty, and conflict.

Anxiety, uncertainty, and conflict are often inherent in a school consolidation. While some research suggested some positive opportunities for students, negative perceptions of consolidation initiatives can exist with community members and staff members.

Superintendent Brown expressed the ability to remain calm and somewhat detached from the emotional aspects of the process and remain mindful of the plan. To illustrate this point, Superintendent Brown shared the memory of the meetings where the two School Boards—West Community School District and East Community School District—voted to approve or not approve whole grade sharing. It was known there was a naysayer on the [East Community School District] Board but that was not a concern to the superintendent. The focus was on the results of the vote. As Superintendent Brown shared:

When we took the vote, I was pretty sure it was going to pass. And here it was unanimous. At [East Community School District] there was a, I think it was a four to one vote to go into whole grade sharing. Um, so, I know we texted back and forth and, you know, someone said hey, [East Community School District] voted yes. Then we come back and [West Community School District] voted yes. And, and, um, so that was a good thing.

Superintendent Brown said it was “so nice to have people that weren’t yelling across the room at each other and arguing. I mean, there was some of that in some of our individual Board meetings, but whenever the two districts got together they worked together fine.”

It was mentioned that school administration was “very aware of traditions” and there were not “a lot of issues” on the traditions of the students because they [committee] had done “a fairly good job” with those but it “was more with some of the adult traditions.” As examples, Superintendent Brown mentioned that the East Community School District support staff had a
Union and the West Community School District did not have a Union. Also, the contracts for teachers were “vastly different.” It was mentioned that working through contractual issues and the creation of new contracts involved understanding concerns and then being able to come to a resolution that was agreeable to all stakeholders.

Community Member Smith talked about the challenges with transportation and the perceived rivalry of the two school districts. “Being rural played a big part in the discussion on how much time kids were going to have to be on a bus and how students would be supervised,” said Community Member Smith. Community Member Smith did share “I was very relieved that I didn’t have children in the process. The social part of it worried me—the groups getting along and the students getting along as you throw them all together.”

Alumni Student Wilson was aware that a family that has been in the school district for multiple generations may see the impending changes differently than a family who has moved into the school district. It was shared that Alumni Student Wilson had a graduating class of 46 students and “of those 46 that we had as seniors we probably had 40 of them when I was a kindergartener.” In regard to personal family circumstances and how a multi-generation connection to the school may affect an individual’s thinking rather than if an individual’s family had moved into the school district, Alumni Student Wilson shared that “my dad went here, I went here, and my grandpa went to this school” and then there was the realization that “this may not continue.” Alumni Student Wilson felt that the students who did not have a multi-generational connection to the school would have “had it easier since they can change easier, not that changes are easier, but you just become numb to them is the best way to say it.”

Alumni Student Davis shared that administration seemed a “little bit concerned” with putting school rivals in the same building so one of the ways used to build relationships was to
have an assembly on the first day “they came” and in that assembly recognizing “this is what’s going on and these are the expectations for you so buckle up, but outside of that there was never really a need for an assembly.” Alumni Student Davis attributed the ability to not “really think much of it until it actually happened and then I was like of there’s all these new people and I have no clue who they are.” It was felt “[administration] did a really, really good job of kind of mixing us all together.” Alumni Student Davis did share there was an impact, sometimes negative, on friends and family members and this had caused concern. Alumni Student Davis recalled that some friends from West Community School District struggled with the connections that Alumni Student Davis made with individuals from East Community School District. It was shared that an orientation day at the end of the year before the “official school year started” would have been helpful. It was felt this would have been especially useful for the middle school students and younger high school students to “meet and greet where you can just see the people you’re going to have to get to know and then you can kind of build those relationships sooner rather than later.” It was shared that “my younger sister had kind of a heck of a time in middle school so I wish there had been something more for middle schoolers because I felt like a lot of the focus was on the high school. High schoolers are important too but children are, you know, the priority.” An example shared of an action taken to “bridge the rift” was the assigning of lockers. Alumni Student Davis shared that every other student locker at the high school was assigned to either a West Community School District students or to an East Community School District student. This helped in “mixing everyone together which I assume was very strategic in that they thought you’re more likely to talk to someone that you see once or twice everyday who’s right beside you.”
School Board President Adams felt the emotion around the school consolidation process had been a little overwhelming at times. The comment was made that “all of our board members were contacted by a lot of people. I would be in my yard and people would stop in. I would get phone calls, emails, just a lot of concerns.” It was felt “in the end it all turned out fine. I don’t have any enemies or anything, you know, so, but it was tough in the beginning. It was.” School Board President Adams related that there were negative people and the level of negativity was surprising. School Board President Adams shared that “some of the parents were very, very negative and not even willing to consider change.” There was an understanding that “people handle change in different ways and this was going to be a huge change. It seemed like different communities in the district were a lot, were more negative than others”. The negativity shown by some was “hard to take” according to School Board President Adams.

The impact of the negativity kept resurfacing during the two interviews with School Board President Adams. Though it was felt the negative comments weren’t personal and the people “weren’t personally, you know, attacking me but just the role I played on the Board.” School Board President Adams shared that “you kind of have those feelings, you know, I thought we were friends why are you talking so negatively about this and if it got out of hand I would just recommend them, just come to the next work session and voice your concerns to the entire Board.” School Board President Adams felt it was important for the entire Board to respond or work through concerns as an united group.

*Make do / positive thinking.*

When asked how to describe personal feelings during the process, Superintendent Brown remarked that “this might sound weird, but it was kinda fun work, because people worked together so well.” Superintendent Brown said it was particularly noteworthy that “we had all
those committees and things like that. We didn’t have people shouting across the room at each other or anything like that.”

Typical of all the comments shared during the two interviews by Community Member Jones, there was an emphasis on the positive aspects and how this time had allowed the Unity Community District to maximize financial incentives. The pride originally felt by Community Member Jones for the West Community School District extended to the East Community School District and then the Unity Community School District as the process evolved. A comment was made that if individuals “feel that if they have been a participant rather than directed to do things, I think that makes a big difference in how people respond.” Community Member Jones mentioned that the committee work included compromises by West Community School District and East Community School District and that comments such as “wow, we had never considered doing it that was, how has that worked for you” were made and there was “a lot of back and forth” that resulted in perceived positive recommendations and decisions. As Community Member Jones said:

As we went through whole grade sharing many of those small items were ironed out and when it came time for the actual merger, it was already done. But, the leg work was done during the whole grade sharing. That is where the main pieces were fixed, were prepared for the future merger. And so, there were five years in there that things could be adapted and adjusted, tweaked, reconsidered. And, so when the actual merger came forward, it was a very simple process. And not every district has that. I have watched other districts around here that fought and battled, and it has just been nasty and this one went so smooth that even the [state resource agency] people were shocked. They said wow! But
it was the preparation and the consideration of both districts, of all stakeholders, that was critical with the communication.

*Strive for credibility / staying in my lane and role adherence.*

Superintendent Brown emphasized that trust, the ability to listen, and a thorough understanding of the state mandated requirements for reorganization were elements that had been vital throughout the process to gain support for the newly formed school district. Superintendent Brown expressed that the words “data collector, advisor, organizer” would befit the role served by the superintendent. Throughout the two interviews with Superintendent Brown, there was little mention of specific names of people who had been involved in the process. Superintendent Brown’s comments were focused overall on the development and execution of the plan and the groups of people—ie school board, school administrators, community members, faculty and staff, students—involved in the planning rather than the names of specific individuals who had helped execute the plan. It was evident that the superintendent felt responsible for knowing and understanding the rules and requirements for whole grade sharing and school consolidation. To achieve this understanding, Superintendent Brown also recognized the involvement of those beyond the residents of the school district. Credit was given to the state Department of Education for the support given although it was also recognized that “it’s not a secret that the Department of Education is supporting having fewer school districts, putting school districts together.” There was also recognition given to other schools and especially colleagues such as other superintendents who had gone through a similar process and who were “good support on, uh, how do we do things and such.” It was also mentioned that there was “a lot of support from Board members which was important especially with the Board presidents, um, sharing the same vision for where we want to go.”
As the superintendent and perceived leader of the school district, Superintendent Brown stressed the demand for organization and delegation of responsibility and said, “I couldn’t do everything, you know, for both districts [during whole grade sharing] that I would do for just one.” With this in mind, Superintendent Brown shared, ”I got a lot more comfortable with passing things on and becoming better at identifying who and what we delegate to.”

Though there was an awareness of the discussions and emotions that were happening especially toward the topics of school symbols and traditions, Superintendent Brown stayed within his identity as the operational and instructional leader of the school district and remained emotionally detached. This ability to maintain an awareness of the emotional attachments individuals had as changes were proposed, but also having the ability to not get sidetracked by these emotional attachments, was key to being able to continue to make progress on a fairly strict timeline.

Superintendent Brown was the only participant who elaborated on the need to adhere to contracts and follow procedures when making staffing decisions. This is befitting of the role of the superintendent as one who is guided by policy and is bound to upholding contracts. Superintendent Brown referred to the need to follow Iowa law and, as an example, shared that Iowa law says if “there was Union when you reorganized then all the people, um, uh, become members of that one Union.” Superintendent Brown noted that contracts and staffing were issues that were consistently scrutinized.

Superintendent Brown’s interpersonal skills, knowledge base, and frank nature, while also being diplomatic, were defining characteristics and important tools for the position. Superintendent Brown was very self aware and this knowledge of the position of the superintendent had been used to formally and informally move ideas forward. Three of the six
participants—school board president and the two community members—specifically expressed respect and admiration for the role served by the superintendent.

Community Member Smith identified with the long-term, multi-generation community member role. Many of the comments shared by Community Member Smith were sprinkled with references to family members and the feelings and actions of those family members. It was shared that family members reacted in different ways to the various topics that arose with school consolidation and the older generation tended to be the most reluctant to make changes. When further reflecting on being in conversations when different generations were sharing their viewpoints, Community Member Smith said it was important to be nonconfrontational and to be a listener and an encourager in an informal way and to be positive about the increased opportunities for students.

Alumni Student Wilson was content with being a member of the last class to graduate from [East Community School District]. Alumni Student Wilson self-professed that “I’m kind of a person who doesn’t like a lot of change anyways so that’s one thing. It just felt like [East Community School District] was what I knew and I liked it and I didn’t want to, uh, give up my school or switch over that way.” Alumni Student Wilson recalled it felt like “you were losing your identity in a way so I was happy being [East Community School District] the whole way through. It’s a little bit like a pride factor.” Alumni Student Wilson shared that identity was an issue and “you kind of lose your, the school identity that was yours. The easier side of it was just that it happened. The harder part of that was you’re on the outside looking in. So, it’s kind of just going on and you’re kind of letting it go and losing your identity in it.”

Self-described as a “very sociable kind of person,” Alumni Student Davis said, “I was never really intimidated by bringing an entire new school in with ours, I guess. It was never
really something that impacted me, it wasn’t something that like intimidated me I guess.”

Alumni Student Davis emphasized the importance of meeting the people “you’re about to spend the next two years with.” To illustrate the desire to meet people and make new friends, Alumni Student Davis shared the following:

I made a really good friend with the [student] with the locker above mine. I said, ‘Hi, I’m [Alumni Student Davis]’ and I think we are going to be really good friends. Want to go to Dairy Queen later.’ At first it was awkward because we had been rivals. I was in the musical which was a mix of [East Community School District and West Community School District] students and we all got along.

To better introduce the students to one another, Alumni Student Davis suggested “a dance or some kind of big meet and greet kind of thing where you can just see the people you’re going to have to get to know and then you can kind of build those relationships sooner rather than later.” Alumni Student Davis, the child of a person who worked in a fairly high profile job in a community in West Community School District, said it was easier to meet people and make friends since “she [mother] knows a lot of people and just has a lot of connections to people and parents knew my mom.”

School Board President Adams answered most of the questions asked by others from the viewpoint of a School Board member but the strong identity as a parent and community member was also apparent as the events of the five years of whole grade sharing was reviewed. It was important to School Board President Adams that people were happy. School Board President Adams interpreted the environment in and through interactions with others and there was a perceived ongoing struggle to act on the behalf of three roles: a school board member who needed to stay united with the other board members, an alumnus who was clinging to memories
of the past, and a community member who wanted to retain relationships with other community members. These roles caused initial distress and the distress lessened as plans were made and implemented. The school board member role seemed to be paramount to the other roles since there was a sense of duty attached to that role and there was also a prescribed and systemic way of involving others.

School Board President Adams desired this interaction with the community and also made it clear that there was always the awareness of the role of a School Board member and the need to represent the sentiments of the Board no matter what were the personal feelings. It was also important to School Board President Adams to maintain relationships with friends and acquaintances throughout the decision-making and implementation process.

Where I came to rest.

It was shared by Superintendent Brown that a state Department of Education handbook on district reorganization was “kinda poured over to pretty deeply understand what the requirements of the state are” and to help set the process that was followed. It was important the requirements were met and that the timeline and paperwork were completed according to the process outlined in the handbook. Superintendent Brown was proud to have met the timeline and that the necessary paperwork was all completed.

There was also a level of pride expressed throughout the comments of Community Member Jones; there was pride in having served as a committee member on a committee which had reached a perceived level of success and there was pride in being a part of a school district that was perceived to be able to continue into the future. Community Member Jones shared this feeling of pride by saying, “From the components that I was involved with, I would not change anything in that process because it was well done. It was one of those, do it right the first time, and I felt that was done.” As Community Member Smith reflected on the size of the Unity
Community School District, it was proudly shared that “we are one of the larger districts in miles with the merger, since the consolidation took place.”

This pride in the perceived sustainability of the school district and in the role played by family members to help make the consolidation a reality was expressed by Community Member Smith. There was also continuing concern expressed on the location of the high school now being in a different community from what was known in the past. The reconfiguration of the use of buildings had moved the high school to a location further from Community Member Smith’s home. It was shared that “[community in West Community School District] who has always been, they were always seen as the big city in the district now has the high school and so where the high school is at is usually the meet space after school.” Community Member Smith expressed that the community where Community Member Smith’s home was located would no longer be a destination point since people attending school events “were going to travel to a high school event and they were not going to [Unity Community School District] for something, they were going to [community within Unity Community School District].” Community Member Smith still had a tendency to forlornly talk about things of the past but was trying hard to stay on the positive side of the process. Throughout the two interviews, comments were made about the need for people to move forward in their thinking about the school’s future and it was hoped that “everyone can see the positive outcome.”

It was evident through the comments of Alumni Student Wilson that there was strong identification with the school through athletics and the four generations of family (there were now nephews in the school) who had affiliated with the school. It seemed there was a consistent juxtaposition of a desire to be supportive of the school but also there was a tinge of regret that the school location, especially the high school, had changed and, especially, the size of the
school had changed which, in the opinion of Alumni Student Wilson, had affected the ability of students to participate. Alumni Student Wilson shared:

I am going to contradict myself with what I say here. I talked about more opportunities being available and I definitely think there were but it is also kind of weird that you get a kid who maybe would have gone out for a sport, would have been in band, drama, or something at the smaller school and once the two schools combined, the students would see that there are 27 people out for that and decide not to go out for that. So, in that way it was kind of odd because there are so many people already in it, so you feel like, I am not needed here. But, in the small school, people are like I’m needed because the team won’t go on or the play won’t have enough people, which is kind of a weird thing because I know I said earlier that there are more opportunities, more involvement, but in a way more opportunities spreads it out thinner for people to be involved in stuff and you get some kids that maybe would have been in some stuff but they pass on it because they think they are not needed or whatever. Not a huge impact or breakthrough idea or anything like that but just something that I have kind of noticed looking from the outside in.

Alumni Student Wilson was very positive about the opportunities for the school district to grow and change in the future and felt there is “definitely more opportunity now because of the way the school is structured. I think the future should be bright.” As a person who worked for the family business within one of the communities in the school district, Alumni Student Wilson said there was initial concern the business would be impacted because of the potential loss of traffic through the community because of relocation of the high school. Some of these concerns had kept Alumni Student Wilson from initially viewing the whole grade sharing and
eventual consolidation as positive. Alumni Student Wilson was remorseful for these initial feelings and now regretted not having been more of an advocate for “the whole thing” especially as it was evolving in the early stages. Alumni Student Wilson shared it was now realized that the relocation of the high school had not noticeably impacted the family business. “Some people thought it was going to ruin their lives. Some time in that first year they started in buy in,” said Alumni Student Wilson.

Alumni Student Wilson continued by saying the community started to “look at it that it’s [consolidation] going to happen, it’s a necessity. So, you’re only going to be delaying the process if you push back on it. I think is what people ended up realizing.” When asked about the overall experience with whole grade sharing and school consolidation, Alumni Student Wilson said that the process has “definitely been a learning experience.” Alumni Student Wilson shared that “change is hard, but you have to keep an open mind. You can decide if the change was good or bad once you have really experienced it.” Alumni Student Wilson shared personal changes. The initial reflection was on the role of a student and the reflection switched to the present role of a community member and business person in the community:

I’ve definitely just grown up you know personally. You go through a lot of change from being a high school student to a college student graduating. You just learn and grow as an individual anyways. But kind of on the side of it with the perspective toward the school, I think at first, I was, um, it was kind of like, I felt like, great I’m done with it. I don’t need to worry about it. Then as I’ve kind of grown up, I’ve looked more at how it has maybe impacted the community, so at first it was kind of like I’m done with it and no reason to worry about it. And now as I’ve sort of grown up and gotten more involved
with actual community things or business side of things, you start to look at from a, maybe a larger perspective.

Alumni Student Wilson spoke of the facilities and how they had changed and how it was perceived to be more difficult to attend a school activity. It was shared that “just the aspect of not being able to just stop at a game or run out to a game” made it less likely for Alumni Student Wilson to attend an activity. Alumni Student Wilson’s comments contained many references to athletics and participation in athletics that had contributed to identity.

I went back to a couple of football games my freshman year in college after it was [Unity Community School District] and you just look out there and you’re like that’s not, now I have to go to a [West Community School District] game to see my school or whatever. So, that was kind of a rough one I think for the, for myself, but again that’s a personal thing just on the sports side of things. I’m interested in that.

There were also concerns about those activities which had been high school memories when Alumni Student Wilson said “the baseball field is not getting used at, which is fine, they have a nice baseball field in [community in West Community School District]. But I was up there [former baseball field at East Community School District] a couple of years ago and the whole field was just growing over with grass and it’s kind of hard to see that.” Throughout the two interviews, Alumni Student Wilson seemed to be wrestling with weighing the pros and cons and what was viewed as the present situation and was termed as the “changes yet to come.”

When asked if the right decision had been made about school consolidation, Alumni Student Davis responded that “at least for me I think it was definitely a good thing.” Alumni Student Davis said thoughts about the consolidation of the two districts and of the students within the two school districts concentrated on thinking about it as “any other day and there was
a conscious effort to not make it weird.” Alumni Student Davis shared “it is important to remember to keep building awareness of the community.” It was felt the experience had helped build independence and opened students up to be ready for new experiences. Alumni Student Davis concluded by saying “my memories at [Unity Community School District] trump the memories I have of [West Community School District].”

When asked when it was known that the right decision had been made concerning school consolidation, School Board President Adams said that “seeing the kids together and seeing them excited about the whole grade sharing situation, um, and just hearing the good feedback from the students on, you know, how well things were going” reinforced that the right decision had been made. School Board President Adams shared that “I’m glad that that’s [whole grade sharing and consolidation] going to be part of my story of my life, is that I was part of it. Um, I guess that kind of sums it up. I mean I, It’s just been a very rewarding experience for myself.”

School Board President talked of the “positive vibe” that was present in the school and that “kids and staff seem happy and content with what they’re doing and how we’re doing things.” There was the feeling that the “community has come together even more” and people from all of the towns come to community events. School Board President Adams shared that “I came to (community in West Community School District) for the parade this summer and saw people from all over the district. And, you know, I think they feel like, oh, I know people there so I’m coming to enough myself, you know, with people I know.”

Summary

Superintendent Brown, Community Member Jones, Community Member Smith, Alumni Student Wilson, Alumni Student Davis and School Board President Adams are six participants who had overall positive feelings about the school consolidation process and the results of the process. All participants felt there had been some negativity and each participant felt a
responsibility in advocating for change. The meaning making associated with each of their involvement in the process and with the respective school districts is found in the themes that emerged during the data collection and analysis process completed for this study.

**Research Questions and Coding Structure Restated**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the role of school identity during the consideration of rural school consolidation and to explore the affective, behavioral, and social factors that are involved within the consideration of consolidation of a rural Midwestern school district. The questions sought to understand how implementation experiences shaped participants’ perceptions and thinking about school consolidation. Based on participant descriptions of lived experiences, the study attempted to answer two research questions:

Question one: How does the school consolidation process impact various stakeholders’ self- perceived identity?

Question two: How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self- perceived identity of the stakeholders?

It is desirable to provide school districts considering reorganization or consolidation with a framework to help in addressing the issue of school identity in the process. The analytical framework for the examination of these research questions was a place attachment perspective.
Place attachment is a way of understanding connections between people, places and events that are occurring in the present or have occurred in the past, in order to plan and take action for the future. The attachment to place is an internal and reflective activity for the individual and, also, an external and communal activity where a group of people are trying to solve multiple problems to gain larger goals. In the context of this study, the activity is self-perceived identity within the school consolidation process. It was heartening to witness the enthusiasm the study participants exhibited as they responded to the questions.

Participants called upon their individual roles and identities and their interpretation of their communal role to represent cognitive, social, and behavioral factors. In addition, socially constructed factors of place attachment included participants’ perception of their place within the
beliefs, values, culture, and norms of their local context. The bioecological model is the theoretical framework for integrating findings in a meaningful and theoretically relevant way.

Figure 4.3 Visual depiction of the Bioecological Model used as a framework for organizing themes relevant to identity

Subsequently, the coding structure for this study identified themes in the place attachment of the six participants in the context of school consolidation through considering and separating how each participant engaged in the conscious mode of meaning construction while also taking up a contemplative stance toward his or her already admitted interpretive scheme. Using this conceptual level of coding as the first step in the coding process helped in the analysis of individual and collectively determined meanings as it related to the questions of “person, place and process”. The second step of the coding process involved coding these elements into subcategories for further fine-tuning.
Table 4.2 Steps in coding

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<td>• Coding Round 1 – Open Coding</td>
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<td>*Memories and experiences –“rootedness”</td>
<td>*Satisfaction toward the place</td>
<td>&gt;emotional interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Time – length of residence</td>
<td>*Time – connection to past</td>
<td>*Time – acceptance of change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements were examined for themes and patterns within the research questions by identifying common ideas through statements. After the elements were fleshed out, statements were sorted into two categories by each of the research questions. More detail was added in round three to reflect the intricate weaving of the actions and phenomena inspected (Table 4.3).
Table 4.3  Further summary of the findings and themes by research question

| Coding Round 3  
| Sorting by Research Questions  
| RQ 1 – Identity  
| RQ 2 - Experiences  
| Overlap and Complex Connections among Categories  
| Transcribed Data and Document Review  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Findings and Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **RQ1: How does the school consolidation process impact various stakeholders’ self-perceived identity?** | Identity means socially prescribed rules and role(s), social/cultural/institutional connections, identification with environment and conformity to broader social community.  
*Social factors* – changing social relationships and the views of others, cultural exchanges  
*Cultural factors* – characteristics of rural environment, expectations and requirements  
*Individual factors* – adaptable (or not), advocate (or not), leadership, influential people  
*Memories and experiences* – traditions, symbols, “rootedness”  
*Physical factors* – relation to natural and built location  
*Cognitive* (beliefs and identity – complicating identities of individuals), **behavioral** (desire to maintain, guided by past), **emotional** (sense of belonging, sense of pride, emotional impact, attitude)  
**Time factor** – multi-generations, length of individual and family residence, connection to past, response of different age groups |
| **RQ2: How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders?** | Gradual decline of personal interest and noting how personal gains can be maximized through participation in prosocial system of exchange with others  
*Social factors* – comfort zone, making sense out of chaos, disruption and discussion  
*Cultural factors* – proximity, opportunity  
*Individual factors* – visionary, innovation, present vs. future image  
*Memories and experiences* – anxiety about loss, vulnerability due to size, doubt about ability to survive  
*Physical factors* – proximity, transportation, community connection  
*Cognitive* (policy, practice, procedure organizational learning), **behavioral** (strategic change, collaboration, communication), **emotional** (what matters)  
**Time factor** – change transformation, how fast is “too fast,” retrospective |
Analysis was accomplished by identifying the smallest piece of data whose meaning was relevant to the research and could stand on its own. The consistency of the findings was constantly checked and rechecked or triangulated. This aided in establishing converging lines of evidence to make the findings as robust as possible. Each piece of information was analyzed and compared with earlier findings about the topic which led to further development of the topic. I determined whether or not to continue to focus on a particular topic based on whether new ideas kept arising in the data or did not arise leading to analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Data were collected from six participants—one superintendent, one school board president, two alumni students, and two community members. Each participant responded to 44 questions using a two-part semi-structured interview protocol. The participants were selected due to their roles and knowledge of the school consolidation process. Interviews were recorded and I collected notes during the interviews. The conversations with each participant using the semi-structured interview protocol allowed for individuals to give their perceptions about the role of individuals and school identity in the school consolidation process as well as their role in the process.

**Themes**

Eight themes surfaced from an analysis of the data gathered from the six participants and archival documents. These eight themes were related to the two research questions and included:
1) “rootedness in the ‘land’ in a physical and cultural sense;” (2) “bridging social capital;” (3) “on it like a duck on a June bug;” (4) “traditions and symbols;” (5) “present vs. future image;” (6) “process of taming;” (7) “redirection away from individual interests;” and (8) “gradual decline of interest.” Overall, participants discussed their perception of the school consolidation process and their role in the process. The findings resulted in a high level of consistency across participants, which is reported in this chapter.
As I presented the findings related to the research questions, it became clear that acknowledging and addressing the emotional impact of the elements involved in school consolidation were vital to success with the perceived as well as actual outcome. Participants noted the need to communicate on an ongoing basis, involve various stakeholders in the process, and recognize, as well as respect, the traditions and symbols of each school district. The importance of listening was stressed. As a result of the perceived consistent and two-way communication, participants viewed that leadership was concerned as much with sharing information and giving procedural guidance as well as making decisions regarding the symbols of the consolidated district. Decisions were made collaboratively rather than in isolation or solely by school administration. Leadership was respected and leadership came from many directions including administration, school board, students, committee members and influential people in the community.

Furthermore, participants viewed the perceived success of the school consolidation efforts through their respective multiple roles that they played in the process. A sense of loss emerged depending on the role of the individual and how that individual was affected by others. It was evident that each participant saw and interacted with the world through many lenses and, therefore, each participant had a vested interest in the school consolidation process and each felt he or she had played a significant role in the perceived success of the process.

Participants in this study presented an overall positive outlook for whole grade sharing and school consolidation. It was heartening to witness the enthusiasm the study participants exhibited as they responded to the questions. The data from this study, as analyzed through the research questions, analytical framework and coding system, resulted in the finding that the various elements including the issue of identity involved in whole grade sharing and school
consolidation can more likely be resolved successfully if a well-communicated plan with active participation and input by various stakeholders is implemented over a reasonable period of time.

In response to Research Question one, five themes were identified: (1) “rootedness in ‘the land’ in a physical and cultural sense” (2) “bridging social capital;” (3) “on it like a duck on a June bug;” (4) “traditions and symbols;” and (5) “present vs. future image.” The first of these themes, entitled “rootedness in ‘the land’ in a physical and cultural sense,” influences how aspects of the process are understood by the individuals involved. Description of identity is a core component and lies importantly in the hands of others. Participants gave examples of how their identity was impacted by the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process and provided a lens for the process.

Within the section “rootedness in ‘the land’ in a physical and cultural sense” there are four sub-sections describing the identified roles and surroundings of the participants: (1) “complicating identities;” (2) “meaning of rural;” (3) the way we have always done it—rural environment;” and (4) “if you build it, they will come—built and natural environment.” In these sub-sections, the rural setting is discussed and how each participant had a distinctive role and how each perceived the role each played in the process. Participant perceptions about the rural stereotype are described as well as how an individual is viewed by others. This is followed by the second major theme “bridging social capital.” It is suggested that enacted environments are partly of one’s own making and not simply objects to which one reacts. Identity is affected by the reaction of others. Within the section “bridging social capital” there are three sub-sections describing the concept: (1) “wearing many caps;” (2) “big fish in little pond vs. smaller fish in a bigger pond;” and (3) “you can lead a horse to water but can you make him drink—influential roles.” The third theme is “on it like a duck on a June bug” which explores the concept of action
and suggests it is more important to keep going than to pause, because the flow of experience in which action is embedded does not pause. Two sub-sections within this section include “thinking and action” and “pride in self-sufficiency.” The fourth theme is “traditions and symbols” and this section explores the balance between opportunities for change versus threats to change and the importance of respecting the past when creating a new school culture. Within this theme, three sub-sections exist: “bricks and mortar;” “branding—mascot, colors, name;” and “Friday night lights, etc.” The fifth theme is “present vs. future image” and the findings in this section share how the participants view progress in the form of anticipation and exhibit the resilience needed to keep moving forward. This balance between anticipation and resilience shows how the threat to well-being became the opportunity to enhance well-being. Sub-sections within this fifth theme include “rational thought vs. emotions” and “what is lost and what is gained.”

Second, in response to research question two, I describe the findings related to the experiences within the “process of taming,” “redirection away from individual interests,” and “gradual decline of interest.” In the first section of “process of taming,” I discuss the explication of predecisional activities and how the micro-mechanism was formed to produce macro-change over time. This response to change reveals the process in which individuals identify and make sense of complex systems that unfold over space and time. This section has five sub-sections that discuss how the experiences of the participants initially began with chaos and organizing flux and evolved as planning continued: “when pigs fly—vision, “shift from top-down to bottom-up—leadership”, “busy as a bee—collaboration, communication, and awareness”, “what’s in it for me— incentives”, and “good enough for me—resources”. Second, I discuss the second theme of “redirection away from individual interests” or more precisely the
suggestion that plausibility guides goal-directed behavior. Within this section there are two sub-
sections: “emphasis on students” and “don’t spread the gravel before you build the road—action
plan.” The sub-sections overview the premise that action is always a tiny bit ahead of cognition
and participants act their way to belated understanding. Third, I overview findings related to the
theme entitled “gradual decline of interest.” This includes participants’ perceptions of how
people find common ground and adapt to circumstances as the environment is altered. The sub-
sections “gone in the blink of an eye—finding right speed for change” and “keeping your nose to
the grindstone—the work continues” capture the positive causal linkage of what is believed and
the negative causal linkage of what is doubted. The sub-sections describe how participants are
increasingly dependent on each other for fulfillment of plans and goals as the expectancies
continue.

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of school identity during the
consideration of rural school consolidation and to explore the affective, behavioral and social
factors that are involved within the consideration of consolidation of a rural Midwestern school
district. The study was designed to give voice to various stakeholders that would allow for the
study of the phenomenon of self-perceived identity within the context of school consolidation.
Therefore, collected data were in the form of participants’ responses. These data presented, as
filtered through the coding process, led to credibility and trustworthiness of the findings
presented in this chapter.

**Research Question One: How does the school consolidation process impact various
stakeholders’ self-perceived identity?**

The coding scheme for this study led to the identification of five components of self-
perceived identity for the various stakeholders: (1) “rootedness in ‘the land’ in a physical and
cultural sense;” (2) “bridging social capital;” (3) “on it like a duck on a June bug;” (4) “traditions
First presented are findings of “rootedness in ‘the land’ in a physical and cultural sense within the school consolidation process and the role(s) each played within the process. Furthermore, I present key findings of the significance of the rural environment on giving identity to each participant. These key findings are presented in sub-sections entitled “complicating identities,” “meaning of rural,” “the way we have always done it—rural environment.” and “if you build it, they will come—built and natural environment.”

The key findings and related sub-sections represent themes from at least five of the six participants. Unless otherwise noted, findings represent themes across the entire participant group.

**Self-perceived identity.** Identity construction is at the root of place attachment and description of identity is core and distinctive to discussions of the environment. All participants commented on the internal and reflective thinking that occurred throughout the process of school consolidation and, also, the external and communal activity that happened as a group of people tried to solve multiple problems to reach larger goals. Each participant’s attachment to place was a way for them to understand connections between people, places and events that were occurring in the present or occurred in the past and this understanding helped them in planning and taking action for the future.

The participants were very candid in their responses and their perceptions of their perceived identity and how school consolidation threatened as well as enhanced this identity. Many mentioned the difficulty in accepting change and each shared how their self-perceived identity had been impacted by the school consolidation process. Community Member Smith commented that it was hard because there was a feeling of “so used to everything that’s gone on” and now things were changing. Superintendent Brown said the days when everyone is self-
sufficient and they had their own school are likely gone and “now we have to reach out over 350
square miles.” First and foremost, each participant felt he or she had played a part in keeping the
importance of acknowledging and respecting identity part of the discussions and balancing the
more quantitative issues along with the emotions that were ever present throughout the process.

**Self-perceived identity: Rootedness in ‘the land’ in a physical and cultural sense.**

Table 4.4 Participant quotations regarding rootedness

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>The fact that they’re all kind of related and work together in intermingling. They know each other. Even if they have a different climate or tradition or something, they’re still rural [name of state]. You know, we’re all just small town Iowans and that’s how it fits together. Um, I haven’t seen a lot of difference in the community’s culture. Um, there’s more impact on that probably due to just the loss of, to me it’s enrollment but to everybody else it’s population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>The students are really the ones that created the support base because they got along with each other. And, if they start complaining, then that comes home to mom and dad or grandma and grandpa and that’s when the ripple effect starts. Students are resilient, they will manage through change. That helped all the adults manage the change as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>It was the older generation that was a lot more verbal. (long pause) So Dad goes to the [local agriculture supply store], he would get all kinds of information. The generation that still had students in school was a lot more cautious, not knowing what was going to happen, how it was going to look. In my personal life that overlapped because [sister] is older than me but had a child in the school district and the was the only grandchild that would go to [Unity Community School District]. The older people were the more vocal ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Wilson</td>
<td>It was, you know, it, the school, is your job essentially for years. You know you go to school, there would be time where you would spend a whole day there. You would get there in the morning at you know six or seven for practice or something, you’re there all afternoon and even into the evening for other practices, but so it’s such a huge part of your life that has changed and you still wanted to know what was happening. You know, because it was a big thing in your life and then it, it left and changed. Not that it affected me because I would have left anyway, but I still wanted to know kind of how it was working just because of how big a part of my life it was. So, I would say I definitely was interested and active in the communication and in knowing what was happening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Davis</td>
<td>Growing up I knew every single person in my class. My bus driver was my neighbor. You know the janitor of my elementary school lived two blocks over. And it’s just kind of like not being necessarily surprised by new things but being kind of immediately taken aback by, you know. It’s always the experience, and especially I know as a first grader, being the new kid, you know, when someone or something new comes along everyone’s kind of awestruck by it, because they are so used to everything that’s gone on for such a long time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board President Adams</td>
<td>I always felt like a family. We were rural. We relied on each other.</td>
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</table>
In this section the setting is discussed and how each participant had a distinctive role and how each perceived the role each played in the process. In further refining the distinctive roles involved in the school consolidation process, four sub-sections emerged as being shared across participants. These sub-categories were “complicating identities”, “meaning of rural”, “rural environment”, and “if you build it, they will come—natural and built environment.” I will first discuss participant perceptions on complicating identities.

*Complicating identities.*

Rural populations are distinct because of the tendency to have multi-generations of one family living in close proximity to one another. Furthermore, rural members may have an established residence in one location sometimes living in one home for all or a majority of one’s life surrounded by buildings and artifacts built by past generations. Often there are close and distant relatives living within the geographic area and the long-term knowledge of past events and people within the geographic area is a common topic of conversation. There are expectations for a prescribed lifestyle that befits the area and the people of the area.

Through this extensive interaction with a place, individuals gravitate toward defining themselves in terms of the place, to the extent that they cannot really express who they are without inevitably taking into account the setting that surrounds them as well. Individuals interpret themselves by using the rural community as a locus of attachment or an image for self-characterization. Meaning is given to the landscape and then individuals determine how they fit into that landscape. This intermingling and the sense of fitting into the landscape was threatened by the school consolidation process. The participants reported that it was a consistent challenge to know how the change was going to affect how people interacted and how people would be viewed by others. Superintendent Brown felt that the two school districts and the communities within the school districts would fit well together:
We’re a natural fit because there’s people from the other district working here before we started here. There’s people from the other district that live in our community. There was a lot of back and forth, a lot of relatives back and forth between the two districts. So, you know, the individuals knew each other. It wasn’t like this was a deadly rivalry between the two schools. I mean we had rivalry sports wise, but they all knew each other and they were all very similar individuals. So, I think that’s what made it easiest to make this happen.

This feeling of being a natural fit was also expressed by the other participants but there was also the feeling that the two school districts were distinctly separate from each other and there would need to be an adjustment period as stronger relationships were formed. There was some combativeness expressed towards each school and words and phrases such as “think they are more professional” and “arrogant” and “broken” were used to describe the schools. It was acknowledged that going from “we and us to just us” required effort. People may have known each other but the relationships were shallow, there were preconceived ideas, and effort was needed to deepen the connections among the converging groups of people.

**Meaning of rural.**

The place where all of these identities happen is the rural setting, which can be difficult to define and, therefore, difficult to navigate. All participants had lived in a rural setting for all or the majority of their lives yet they were challenged by defining the meaning of rural. All participants paused for a moment before answering. As Community Member Smith explained, “that question stumped me.” It was difficult for the participants to answer quickly since they shared they were struggling to combine and describe the dictionary definition as well as the emotional definition in their responses. Initial responses ranged from Community Member
Smith saying “not living within city limits” to Alumni Student Wilson saying “a community based around agriculture or farmers. I mean not urban. Not in town.” Alumni Student Wilson said rural is where “the communities are focused on rural activities.” Community Member Jones defined rural as an area that has a population of 5,000 or less “in just communities within like a county. And, it is heavily agriculture. And, it is a distance to go someplace to a shopping mall or to multiple venues to go out to eat, for entertainment. It truly has to be planned to get to that location.”

School Board President Adams defined rural as “a town under a thousand maybe. I think of country, of agriculture.” Superintendent Brown described rural as “relatively remote, not close to a main economic center.” Alumni Student Davis perhaps summed up the perceived reaction of the six participants to the question of defining rural with this response:

I don’t really know how to describe it. Like, I feel it’s more of a feeling than anything else I guess. Especially living in a town now where there’s almost 200,000 people. My college graduating class is going to be over 300 and my high school graduating class was like 92 or something like that. So, I feel like rural is more like the experience than something that can be more so defined.

Community Member Smith said:

I think my whole life has been rural. I did live in the city limits for a short time but we still owned farmland. So, it’s not like life changes within the city limits. You still see the same people, you still visit with the same people. A lot of those people who live in towns go out to the rural areas to work and I grew up within a half mile of the city limits, but I am still a rural person. I think in our Midwest area we are all rural in this part of the state. We don’t have any large towns near us.
One of the key issues in defining rural was establishing the boundary of the rural area. When the participants spoke of their definition of rural, the definition typically emphasized the non-tangible indicators of space such as cognitive structures and social representations and not the demographic or land area. School attendance areas as well as “living in town or in the country” form the rural boundaries for some since words such as “neighbors”, “townpeople”, “country”, and “school rivals” were part of the definition of rural environments.

Being rural meant there were neighbors, friends, and family in close proximity for many of the participants. It was evident local social organizations and institutions such as the school provided routinized social interaction. Defining rural, though difficult to do for the participants, was grounded in the interaction among a group of people and the capacity to address issues of common concern and meet most of their needs through this interaction. Although there may be differences in how school consolidation affects each member of the rural community, changes at the school did still have an impact on most residents in the locality. The local cafes, convenience stores, and churches provided these social opportunities. These shared values and objectives among families and communities played a major role in deciding the two school districts would be a good match for one another and could blend more easily into one consolidated district. Superintendent Brown described how the boundaries of a rural environment led to the social gathering of people and their interaction with the whole grade sharing school consolidation issues:

There was a coffee group at one of the bars or something that had questions. They called the school and my secretary called me and said this group, group of ladies that have coffee all the time, they want to talk to you. Okay, I’ll go talk to them. So, I stopped in at their coffee time, we sat there and talked, and they had a lot of good questions.
The role of local business played a part in the rural definition. Since local businesses relied on the local customers, there was the feeling that business could be lost if potential customers thought differently than the business owner. As Superintendent Brown said, “When someone doesn’t see eye to eye, there’s the chance business may be lost. If you’re a business person as [School Board President of West Community School District], you’ve got to be careful because people will go, go after your business which is your personal life.”

Related to this definition of rural was a finding that participants were affected in their roles by the rural environment. I will discuss perceptions related to the rural environment next.

_The way we have always done it—rural environment_

There was a strong connection to the rural environment. All participants mentioned the strong ties that exist among the members within a community and also the ties that exist with wider networks such as neighboring communities. There are widely shared values and objectives pertaining to the each of the communities. Reciprocity and civic engagement was respected. A feeling of this is “the way we have always done it” existed and “we” was seen as the people who have lived in the location for a long period of time, preferably multiple generations. The community networks have embedded individual and group-level social ties as well as cultural practices that reinforced the behaviors within a given location. Place held the promise of contributing to the development of meaningful identity, something far more substantive than that which was derived from one’s ability to accumulate material goods.

Superintendent Brown talked about the size of the two school districts and how there were concerns about use of buildings and the changes:

[East Community School District] was a school of 400 students. Um, I’m trying to think about how big that would have made the high school. Um, probably about 120 kids in the high school, and over here we had about 250, something like that. There was one
individual who had a save the school thing. Um, he was very nervous about his kids going to a big school. So, then he’s going, well that’s over 300 kids in that one building. That’s still not a big school (laughs). Um, so there was that fear. Um, the business men in town, um, especially when they, we actually had a process where we did vote on which building would be the high school. Even though [East Community School District] there’s no way that [East Community School District] could hold this. One of the [East Community School District] Board members, the one who voted no eventually, uh, said well I think [East Community School District] can be the high school. So, we had to go through that process, and, and do that. And, you know, the business people downtown see that, all those high school events and stuff going away. I mean, those, you don’t get those crowds for middle school events you do for high school events.

Alumni Student Wilson said:

The actual school, internally, they bought in completely and that was sort of a surprise to me. I thought there would be more challenges there. You know I thought it would be a harder process, but it seems they bought right in. [West Community School District] and [East Community School District] they’re kind of right next to each other. You get that rivalry type thing going on. Um, in the sports side of it. It just felt like it would be a us vs. them thing. You know, just, just two different school and then they’re not going to mesh, but they meshed really well. They just absorbed the we’re one school idea. You know, props to them. They did a nice job with that but, um, it felt like it wouldn’t. But they really did.

*If you build it, they will come—natural and built environment*

Rural people can have the unfair depiction as a group of people who lack sophistication.

The perceptions of rural America are many and often involve the thinking that rural life
represents traditional American values rich in community life but is also behind the times, more relaxed and at a slower pace than city life, and without academic and cultural opportunities. Rather than reinforcing this image, the participants instead painted a picture of a rural person as someone who is proud of what has been accomplished and looks forward to future accomplishments. This pride was in the school buildings and facilities as well as the surrounding environment. There was also the feeling that all accomplishments have value and need to be respected and honored. This sense of pride in being rural and the rural lifestyle or, at least, an acknowledgment of this pride was evident in the responses of the participants. Superintendent Brown related a story which illustrated this pride in what had been accomplished:

I’ve been, I’ve been told that the state championship trophy for basketball, girls’ basketball is not going anywhere. It’s going to be in the building (East Community School District) even if it is the middle school, so. I just smile and nod. Yeah. I mean, I don’t know that I ever intended to move it or take it or anything like that, but, um, there’s still, you know everybody’s got that pride factor.

**Self-perceived identity: Bridging social capital.**

Table 4.5 Participant quotations regarding social capital

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>I think it would have been a lot more stressful, if, um, forcing things on both sides saying...You know the thing I can think of the most is (clear throat) um, a lot of [West Community School District] people when we got to those odd but important topics which were mascots and names and all that, would say well they’re the smaller district make them just come over here and we’ll just stay the same. And I felt from a previous experience I had in teaching, you know, in a sharing district, um, I felt that was the wrong way to go because it was, uh, degogatory towards, um, you know, tilted against the [East Community School District] side at that point in time. And so, I had to convince them that it’s not you know that we are a big district and a small district, we’re two districts and we have to have relatively the same say in how this comes together, because we don’t want, cause everything otherwise would have gone [West Community School District’s] way and the [East Community School District] people wouldn’t have been happy and we might not have been able to put it together. So, kind of, you know, I think because I had worked as a teacher at a district that was coming together, I had seen the other way happen.</td>
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### Table 4.5 Continued

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>Many individuals were involved in the process and opinions were sought and there was a concerted effort to help that smaller district know that they are not just being swallowed up and that they are being respected and being heard. There was a conscious effort to include [East Community School District] in absolutely everything because they were the small district and this assured them they were not going to be lost in this process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>My mom and dad because um I was (pause), sometimes you have to listen to what they say because they hear everything in the town and you know it is not right but you just listen and, um, my sister and brother-in-law have a business in town so that was a big concern for them. Another sister had a child in the school still at the time, so she was very worried for how [the child] would fit in with the whole grade sharing and my other sister was glad that her boys were done because they weren’t going to have to play sports with those people. There was a lot of discrimination against the [West Community School District] people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Wilson</td>
<td>I think it was, the biggest thing would have been, you know, as like community members of [community in East Community School District] or business owners, it felt like you were going to just become like a ghost town. You know, if the school leaves, what are we going to have. Well there’s still a school out there, so it’s not a, it didn’t, it didn’t happen completely that way. I think that was the biggest thing, it felt like you were just going to be gone if the school leaves. I think it was probably more the business owners [who had this feeling] not the younger people. I don’t know, not like the college age kids or the, the soon to be college age kids like my class. Um, it felt more like it was the, the people that were, you know, really had the roots in the community. Felt like then they would, they could be the ones, felt like they could be forgotten I guess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Davis</td>
<td>There was a need to bridge the rift and to be social because of the fear of being disliked. People needed to greet people upfront and not be standoffish. There was a need to remember people came from different backgrounds but everyone should be included and it was hard sometimes to limit the inside jokes. There was a feeling, sort of like, [West Community School District] was good at stuff so I think there was kind of a weird air of arrogance.. I think having [East Community School District] come join us gave us some humility a little bit and kind of brought us back down to Earth a little bit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board President Adams</td>
<td>We’ve gotten to know a lot of people and our kids have, they’re resilient. I mean they’ve met so many people and it’s been wonderful. And so, we’ve gotten to know their friends’ parents and have created relationships and, um, I’m also the president of our golf course in [community in East Community School District] and so we’ve brought a lot of new families down to [community in East Community School District] to join our golf course. We’ve brought in new families into our church. Um, so yeah, it’s been, it’s been good.</td>
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In this section participant perceptions are explored about the social connections people have that are based, not on emotional bonds, but on utility, with neighbors, local officials and merchants, and with influential people within and outside one’s community. Attachment to a particular place is a motivator for people to meet and talk, to share concerns about local problems and ideas for solutions, and rather than flee, to stay and fight to preserve, protect, and
improve the community. There is power in the homogeneity of factors. Bridging social capital happened at the individual level because mobility and relationships outside the local community were different for each person. There was a similarity in that lack of productivity was not acceptable and it was respectable to be progressive as long as the boundaries of conformity were maintained.

**Wearing many caps.**

People played multiple roles and consequently held multiple identities associated with different aspects of their lives. Participants in this study were involved at many different levels. It was typical that one person served in multiple roles within the rural community which is befitting of a rural environment. Some of the roles included community member (4 of the 6 lived in the school district), parent (3 of the 6 had children in school presently or children who had graduated from the school), employee or strong connection to an employee of the district (3 of the 6 had been employed by the district or currently were employed or had a spouse currently employed by the district), alumni (4 of the 6 had graduated from the school), volunteer at the school (4 of the 6 served on committees or helped at activities), and spectator at events (5 of the 6 attended school activities). These roles meant the participants interacted with others and the informal and formal conversations they had during these interactions helped form their thoughts about whole grade sharing and school consolidation, understand how they fit into the planned changes, as well as gave them opportunity to influence others.

**Big fish in little pond vs. smaller fish in a bigger pond**

It was evident that the participants began to try to make sense of the whole grade sharing process when they first became aware the issue was being discussed. This initially triggered a sense of violation, albeit at different degrees, since it was an issue that altered their expectations and held significance for them in different capacities. Part of the sense of violation occurred
because the participants struggled to know how to react and respond as they felt their existing account of the world changing and that a new meaning would need to be constructed. Individual and collective identity was needing to be renegotiated and the sense of being a part of a smaller institution that could provide more individualized attention was part of the concern, especially for students and patrons of the East Community School District. Some may argue that neither school nor the combining of the school represented a large student population relative to some educational institutions, but for the rural population it was important to maintain the understanding that people knew each other, knew each others’ families, and were personally connected. Community Member Jones said, “I think that it opened up more doors for people who would never had known each other. To all of a sudden to be with each other at an athletic event or a choir concert or a band concert or any other function in school.”

Alumni Student Wilson shared there were some different options of school districts with which to whole grade share. In mentioning the names of different school districts and the perceived potential problems with each, Alumni Student Wilson shared that it:

got down to [neighboring school district or West Community School District] and right away the initial reaction from students at [East Community School District] was I don’t want to go to [West Community School District]. I would much rather pair with [another neighboring school district]. That’s always been kind of interesting to me. Um I think [East Community School District] and [neighboring district], those two communities would have been a better match or maybe not a better match. They would have been a better, um like the two of them would have blended better. They would have felt like two schools of similar size both helping each other. Um, I think right away the feeling was, with [West Community School District and East Community School District] it was a
small school and a big school and the big school was going to absorb the small school. That was the initial reaction I think. Um, later on I think people realized the high school and stuff had to be in [community in West Community School District] that’s what had to happen and it worked out for the best. But, um, right away I think the initial reaction was I don’t want to go to [West Community School District]. That I don’t want them to just absorb our school.

As Community Member Jones said, “Resistance initially up front was on the feeling of not wanting to be swallowed up. People didn’t want to be anybody but themselves. And the support was we’re better together instead of trying to do it separately.”

Alumni Student Wilson agreed with this sentiment by saying the whole grade sharing did “kind of feel like a big brother and little brother thing” and the schools had to “kind of mesh together.” There was the desire that the schools “can just pair together and make one instead of making, uh, having the big absorb the little” according to Alumni Student Wilson.

Alumni Student Wilson shared:

Whenever I think of the school, I think of the, um the high school and obviously there a school [building] here in [East Community School District] which is not the high school and that is kind of an odd deal. The, uh the school district culture feels like it’s similar to the [community in West Community School District] culture. Um, I don’t know exactly what that culture is they just feel like they match up well. Um, the [three communities in East Community School District] still feel like they still kind of maintain some of that older, um, [East Community School District] culture which is kind of the small school and we kind of do kind of work with what we’ve got. Um but I don’t know that’s, could be you know you could have a completely different view of that if you’re from if you’re
internal in the school or if you’re from [community in West Community School District].

When I think of [Unity Community School District] I think of [community where high
school of Unity Community School District is located]. I think of the high school. Um
even though there is a school right here in [community in East Community School
District] I don’t think about it.

There was also the issue of distance between school buildings and the additional travel
for some stakeholders. School Board President Adams remarked on the conversations that
occurred about the additional miles some had to travel to attend school activities:

To go to that had been one of the things on a weekend, is there a home game, maybe
we’ll just drive out for it. And even though they could do that at [West Community
School District] they’d have to drive an additional five miles. It’s not the five miles. It’s
not the additional mileage. It’s just maybe not feeling welcome quite yet. I think there’s
still some of, some of that with the older alumni. Just not feeling like this is my school.

The idea that the distance was not as rooted in the additional mileage as it was in the
perception that there would be less involvement of the school in the community was shared by
Superintendent Brown. Superintendent Brown said:

You know. Um. We have a hard time getting people, getting our band together to march
in a parade in [name of community in school district] or [name of community in school
district] or stuff like that and I know that rubs those people in the outer communities
wrong, because this is our celebration day. We always have a parade and we always have
a band, the band in the parade. Um we’re not doing that anymore. I mean, we are doing
what we can. Um, the first couple of years we tried to meet everybody’s needs and with
seven communities there were seven Saturdays we were asking kids to go march in a
parade. They didn’t want to do that. And so, we had to, then we set up a system, okay we will come to your parade every other year. Um, we’ve done that some. Uh, we’ve used the middle school band a little bit more, but I can’t say right now how many parades we, our band marches in, because the kids, um, the kid from [one community in the Unity Community School District] is not too interested in marching in the [another community in the Unity Community School District] parade. If the kid is in [the community in which the student lives] you know they’re walking in front of their grandparents and all those people they live with. If they’re in [a community in which the student does not live] they’re in another town.

The combining of activities and the creation of realistic but acceptable ways to meet the needs of the stakeholders was addressed by Community Member Jones. Community Member Jones shared:

The athletic teams and the music coming together has been a common ground. These things were just a common denominator for parents, for grandparents, for children. The love of music brought people together. It wasn’t going to be well you are going to have to compete for a position in the choir because you are coming from [East Community School District]. And, no it was, come on we want the numbers, we want your talent, we will work with you and make you feel comfortable. When you have those larger numbers, it makes for better music, a better sound overall.

You can lead a horse to water but can you make him drink—influential roles.

Five influential roles kept emerging through the comments of the participants. These influential roles were committee member, community supporter, superintendent, school board member, and student. Influential roles, as defined by Community Member Jones, included:
Someone who has donated to the school district whether it is equipment, in kind, money for meals for teams that are travelling, most of the time it will be athletic related. It could be someone who provides vehicles to a district with a lease agreement. Sometimes it can be kind of a conflict of interest but it can also be a religious point. There it could be a pastor who is adamant against something and gathers, rallies the troops to push against. So, it does not always have to be financial, a lot of times it will be, but it will be the status of the individual. An example it might be a very successful business owner, it could be the local banker, it could be the local administrator of a business, maybe a hospital or nursing home, or whatever it might be, there is influence.

Community Member Jones shared that “if that influence can be used in a positive manner, then people are going to buy in quicker from all levels versus this constant negativity going on” and people are more likely to listen to “what the actual facts and information are.” It was also shared by Community Member Jones that “sometimes the best way is to pull the people into committees so they have firsthand information versus hearsay.”

It was noted by Community Member Jones that “if issues popped up, somebody would have a conversation with them.” Community Member Jones continued:

It was really unique watching interactions of some individuals that you just knew that someone over here was going to start stirring something, just to do it and then approaching those individuals and having a conversation about, have you thought about it this way, were you aware of, did you know, here’s the information, here are the facts, here are the numbers, and putting it in front of everybody publicly. Probably one of the first meetings that I was in, I think there were 25 people in the room and there was one individual who was extremely vocal and he happened to be a school board member at the
time. The negative individual was from [East Community School District] and the other individuals from that district got up, went over and sat by him and told him the facts of life. That if we don’t do this were not going to be here in five years. We won’t have a district at all and we need to look beyond ourselves, our selfishness and our pride or whatever it might be. But they handled it so beautifully. Not a single person needed to say anything else.

The participants spoke of the relatively large size of the committees with 30 or so members for each of the five committees and the need for the committees to meet at least once or twice each month due to the short time frame in which to make decisions. The committees reached out to involve more community supporters to help with communication. As Community Member Jones shared:

We had people that wanted to collaborate, they wanted the best for the district as a whole. There were multiple small groups that would get together for a chat or the individuals from our citizens advisory committee would go find four or five people to visit and ask if they had questions. And, we had a sheet of frequently asked questions basically that we could refer to if they had a question on there or we could follow up if there was a question we couldn’t answer. And, the administration was very good about providing additional information if we needed it.

The Superintendent and the school board members were also given credit for the influential roles they had played in the process. As Community Member Jones shared, “The entire process that [the superintendent] put forward worked extremely well. [Superintendent] was the key person, the point person for everything.” Superintendent Brown maintained the role as the leader of the district when it was recalled, “The state is incentivizing [whole grade sharing
and consolidation] and starving us into needing to do it.” It was shared by five of the six participants that the school principals had served as chairpersons for some of the committee work and had gathered students together through school assemblies and such to gather student input and, as Alumni Student Wilson recalled “give information and gather ideas but I don’t really remember much about it. I think some people were more involved than others, and students were asked if they wanted to be on committees.”

Finally, the role of the students in being a primary influencer for positive change was mentioned by all participants. There was a pervasive feeling among the participants that the students had been involved and their opinions had been valued. The students were also thought to be the people who maintained a positive outlook and kept moving forward with change.

Self-perceived identity: On it like a duck on a June bug.

Table 4.6 Participant quotations regarding need to make changes

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>The other districts said well we want to wait and do it in another year. And since we said we’ll do it now, um, that was one of the decisions I told that Board, you know, they asked can we get this all done, I go sure. I didn’t know if we could or not, but, you know, we wanted to do it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>The older members of the community seemed more invested in the traditions and the building. If [Unity Community School District] had closed the [East Community School District] building and brought everything to [community in West Community School District], it was not possible because of numbers but, there, the local church had said, if you do that, if you close the building, if you close the elementary, we will build our own school. And, we will not send them to public school. And therefore there was a concerted effort to make sure that we kept that building open at [East Community School District] and that it was vibrant, and active, and even though the athletic facilities might not be used as much they were still available for practices and middle school activities. And, one high school basketball game is played every year down at the [East Community School District]. So trying to keep connection but yet moving forward.</td>
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<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>I just take everything in. You are going to get a lot of nay-sayers, you are going to get a lot of, ya let’s do this, let’s do it tomorrow. You do have to listen and sort all that out as if you were the person in charge of all of that. The community members, they all want it to be known that they are tax payers, they are invested in this and that and their voices are being heard, whether it is immediate changes or knowing that their voice was heard and respected, listened to and have it explained maybe why a particular option was selected.</td>
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<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>I think the big, one of the big surprises was how I think the students and the actual school were, were the most supportive of the whole process. And I felt like that could be a, looking at it before the whole process, kind of before it got going, that felt like it might be a challenge but it was not. The students were all like full, bought in. The people who were, pushed back on it were the, the community or the communities of the district. Um, the outside looking in. Those people were the ones who had the most, um push back or you know.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>We were all really comfortable where we were and change is hard for anyone but especially when you’re a bunch of teenagers who are really concerned about what’s going to happen in the next, you know, two and a half, three years of your life. The first few weeks or month or so were definitely like the adjustment transition period. But I don’t know if it was much longer after that were I was kind of like I think this is what we really needed and it was just refreshing to have so many new people and so many new points of views come around.</td>
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<td>Davis</td>
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<td>School Board</td>
<td>Living in a rural community, we do have families and farms and things on the outskirts of our district, and so to pick those kids up, you know, to create a route that accommodated everyone to where they need to go, um, a lot of conversation around that. Same, kind of in the same lines, um, there was concerns around what classification our school would be. If we were still going to be a 1A or a 2A or a 3A, depending on our size and where our parents would have to travel to, to participate in sporting events. People were concerned about adjusting schedules since there were longer trips to pick kids up and for events. People needed to be open to sharing rides with others or being open to picking kids up or take kids. Just being open to helping other parents out when transporting kids, I think is the, we set up these, you know, carpool groups in messenger and, you know, it’s just kind of being a parent to everybody’s kids. You know just relying on your neighbors and your friends, and other parents to help out each other.</td>
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<td>President Adams</td>
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The rural school can be a place for the conversation and consensus-building that yields a cooperative philosophy. To make meaning of the whole grade process, individuals jointly engaged with the issue and built their understanding of it together. Individuals listened closely to each other, took turns leading and following, and responded together in real-time. In the relatively short timeframe to move through the process, the stakeholders proved they could be productive and decisive.

**Thinking and action.** Action is the purposeful behavior which is motivated by an envisioned future which is anticipated but has not yet happened. To take action, a participant engages in the surrounding world and, also, reaches into that outside world. As a participant thinks of the idealized outcome, the thoughts become action and then the thoughts become
reality. Cultures change as individual decisions multiply and cohere, and there are new ways of noticing and interpretation. It is important to activate inherent forces. When change is happening or predicted to happen, predictability goes down. It seems that no one knows what lies ahead and, therefore, anxiety sets in. It is important to structure and break the process down into different pieces to make it manageable. Each part should be initialized with sufficient preparation and dispersion of information and then measured with all participants reflecting on the achievements and whether the process was still in alignment with the predetermined goal.

Alumni Student Davis shared the following:

There was a conscious effort to not make it weird. My sister had to be bused to [site of middle school] because she was in middle school, so I talked to her about how her day went and what activities she did while eating supper. My brother was starting his freshman year. There was a lot of friends helping friends. It reminded me of kindergarten or coming to [moving to a community within West Community School District] in first grade. By this I mean it was an intimidating experience. There were negative comments from some of the students that day. But I figured it out and built relationships and bridged the gaps.

School Board President Adams noted how the thinking was addressed through individuals ascribing some meaning to their situations and letting the ascribed meanings become integral parts of the situation which helped shape the situation.

There were negative people that I knew that, I knew that they weren’t personally, you know, attacking me but just the role I played on the board. You know, you kind of have those feelings, you know, I thought we were friends why are you, why are you talking so negatively, you know, about this and if it got out of hand I would just recommend them,
just come to the next, you know, our next work session because they were open too, or our next public hearing. You know, voice your concerns to the entire board.

**Pride in self-sufficiency**

Participants shared about the, as Superintendent Brown called it, “willingness of both sides to dig in and try to make it happen. We put the word out there for volunteers for the committees and no problem.” Superintendent Brown continued by saying, “You know we said there’s going to be all these meetings coming up and we have to do all this and we had a lot of people who raised their hand and said they would do it.” Community Member Jones described the committee members as “productive.” Though there was guidance provided with the leaders very energetic in constructing and promoting understandings and explanations of the process, the stakeholders were also actively engaged in attempting to shape beliefs about certain elements of the issues. There was pride in being the “doers” and not a passive audience to the activity.

**Self-perceived identity: Traditions and symbols.**

Table 4.7 Participant quotations on traditions and symbols

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<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>There’s a lot of unwritten roles, there’s a lot of unwritten things. I kept stumbling over, um, that’s not the way we did it when I would make a decision on things.</td>
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<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>The committees had leadership, chairs with one person from each school district. And breaking down parts and pieces into manageable versus here you do this entire component and you do this component and then we will figure it out. I think that was a big part of it that it was short term assignments. So that in itself helped keep things moving forward. And there was a specific committee that was school colors school song and that was its own entity because we all knew that if there was division with that information, it was going to be a long haul. But, if we could get that solidified, the rest would fall into place.</td>
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<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>The [West Community School District] had held a band carnival for 26 years or something and I chaired it along with my sisters for many of those years. When whole grade sharing began, the carnival did not happen though new leadership was to have taken it over and this was a nightmare of media exposure and an explosion on social media. The carnival built relationships, brought in money, was supported by the older people who had no intention of playing dip the dot or whatever [carnival games] but they went and had a meal – they supported it. The carnival returned after one year because they figured out they needed to be very cognizant of upholding these things.</td>
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<td>Alumni Student Wilson</td>
<td>It felt like the biggest thing that was getting tossed around was the name and then the mascot. Um, I think they should have gone with a name that didn’t involve either school because one way or another you’re going, like, if you, the way it is now, [Unity Community School District]. It still feels like it gets shortened off and you lose the [East Community School District]. Some of the people go oh we’re going up to [West Community School District]. Seems like the [East Community School District] gets lost and actually that has been better in the community. The community’s done a really nice job of, of, being [Unity Community School District]. Where that seems to get lost is outside of the community from some of the, you know, like the, well they made that round of football, the news stations, it felt like it was just [West Community School District] winning their first, you know, whatever since 1992. But, um, that was actually worse outside of the community, that identity side of it. I think the community did a nicer job of really just being like, this is a new school. So, um, the naming side of things I think was the biggest thing and the, um, the mascot was just a, you know, it is what it is. They kind of, I don’t know, I’m not a huge fan of what they did with the mascot. I think they should have come up with something entirely new again. Um, instead of just kind of mashing the two together, but, um, that was just my personal opinion on it. And, um, I think they did, they, they had the students from both schools, not the class of 2013, but the other classes involved in the process of picking the new name and mascot. They had them involved and they picked what they picked, so they’re happy with it or they had a majority that were happy with it at least, so they went with it. Um, I think they would have been better off, or I would’ve, I would have liked to see them have a completely different, entirely separate name.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Davis</td>
<td>I was surprised by how long it took to find a mascot and decide on a school uniform. It took a long time to get to the end result which was surprising and there was a desire for a definitive stamp. The students wanted to have an official role in what the mascot would be. We called ourselves the [mascot name selected] and [name for Unity Community School District] before they were officially branded.</td>
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<td>School Board President Adams</td>
<td>We were very sensitive of traditions in both schools. We couldn’t keep all of them, but I feel we have worked with the students to find out, okay what’s really important to this. Um, for example, [West Community School District] would always have a homecoming parade so we continue to have a homecoming parade. There have been a lot of traditions where we’ve tried to keep, keep that alive. I mean, we valued those, they started for reason, and we’re going to keep doing them.</td>
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Deterrents to change existed in the form of deeply embedded practices and the school sometimes struggled to engage a deep and lasting change process. The six participants described the importance of the traditions and symbols of the school and also included comments on how those traditions related to the community. Alumni Student Wilson shared:

I think the need, you have to take into account what what the school means to the community and kind of take that into account. And if there are traditions that link the
school with the actual town or the, with the surrounding community, we need to take that into account and realize it and maybe see if it’s something that can be kept or something they can modify it to fit the entire district now. Um, which I think they did a fairly good job of things that way on the traditions side of it. Um it’s definitely something you have to consider.

**Bricks and mortar**

Community Member Smith shared a thought about the facilities, alluding to the importance of having a school in a community. It was felt by Community Member Smith “they [school board] have done a good job of keeping all the buildings open. Not all of them, but, um, of keeping everybody, the school represents all the main communities I think.”

Superintendent Brown shared:

There was a concern businesses in the [East Community School District] being affected. With more events at [West Community School District] there would be more traffic out of town. People have to drive up here to see the chorus sing. Uh, stuff like that. So they don’t stop for gas, they don’t run into the grocery store, they don’t go to the restaurant. There was concern of buying everything in [community of high school location] now since they’re going to be there more often. But I don’t think, after a while, um, what I was told is, uh, a lot of those folks over there, they drive buy when you know there’s buses coming and going there, and there’s a parking lot full of employee’s cars and stuff yet. And, oh, I guess this isn’t so bad, we still have traffic over here.

Community Member Wilson reflected on a feeling that was shared by other participants on the perceived loss of access to school activities and the perceived loss of community activity. It was shared that having the high school move to a community further away was difficult and ‘what attracts the community to come to events is usually their attending at the high school level.
You know that’s kind of the, people go to the junior high stuff too or the elementary has stuff going on, they’ll go to that too but, um, the high school side of it feels like that’s the main event. You know, the big, big time deal.” Community Member Wilson continued:

The biggest thing that it feels like to me, it used to be like you could just, anyone could run out to the school and you could you know go to a basketball or baseball game or whatever, you kind of almost have to make it an event because the district is so big and far away from the school now. Um, don’t get to many of those, that type of like school events, I probably would have if it was just [East Community School District]. I probably would have gone to football games and baseball and basketball games. Um, but with it being a larger district and farther away from it, you just don’t get up there to, [community where high school for Unity Community School District is located], as much to see the events and, um, you know go to sporting events and things that way. So, I think that’s, um, kind of in a way something you lost because you’re not able to do that. Um, and then as a, kind of a, on the business side of things, it feels like you would have been better off to have some of those people in your community, you know. I don’t know, it’s hard to know exactly what kind of an impact it was, but, um, you definitely would have had more people coming into your community if you had a high school basketball game two times a week or a high school football game every week. Um, it never hurts to have people in the community and obviously they still have the junior high here in [community in East Community School District] but we, it doesn’t feel like it’s the same amount of people. There’s definitely, it feels like less people. And maybe I’m wrong on that. It just doesn’t have that feeling that you could jump in a car and be somewhere within a matter of minutes.
Superintendent Brown remarked on the need to visually create an identity for the school and that “one of the things we wanted to do was make sure, um, this looked like [Unity Community School District] not [West Community School District]. This building and the same thing over at [East Community School District].” Superintendent Brown said:

You know, we put up all the banners you see over there. Went up before we started coming together. Um, the stuff we’ve got in this building is the same thing. So that was, I think branding, so that had, had an identity was very important to us. For traditions of the districts, one of the things the high school principals did in their meetings was compare homecoming traditions, graduation traditions, you know all those things that we do, um, the social events for the kids. And, we couldn’t keep all of them, but they worked with the students to find out, okay what’s really important to this. Uh, what do we do that we do well and you want to keep. And, you know, one thing [East Community School District] homecoming court what they had always done is go to the, you know, go to the, the student council kids would go to the home of the homecoming court electees in the middle of the night and wake them up and tell them that they’re homecoming and then they’d video that. So, the kids got to watch all these homecoming courts get woke up in their bedroom. And they, they would show that. And so, we still do that to this day. I mean that was one of the traditions that we kept. Um, we, we didn’t name a homecoming king and queen. We just had a court and the court was, I don’t think we intentionally said there’s this many from the district and this many from that. We just said you know elect your court. It was a mix. There’s five boys and five girls that get elected, senior boys and girls that get elected to homecoming court and
there’s no crowning of a king or a queen. That decision came from the high school principal after listening to the input and then thinking okay.

Superintendent Brown related this example of the homecoming court selection illustrated a basic premise that was often followed—make a decision based on input from others, let it sit for awhile, add some new traditions but know what is “really important to this” and then maybe down the road “tweak with it” to make changes. There was a consistent desire to acknowledge the traditions of the schools and the communities and that was manifested in “taking some of them, maybe not all of them, but at least they knew that something was going to continue.”

There were some individuals, such as the high school principal, who led the effort to determine what were the important aspects of the traditions but these individuals were listening to others as decisions were made. As Superintendent Brown said, “Those are the things that people pride themselves on in rural communities.”

Community Member Jones commented about the changes in some traditions and how it was difficult to accept some of the changes. According to Community Member Jones, there was a “desire to not offend anybody” and, in regard to the homecoming king and queen, to not have “the [West Community School District] kids who outnumbered the [East Community School District] always vote for the [West Community School District students] and [West Community School District] be the only one that gets king or queen.” Community Member Jones said:

So it was trying to equalize. So it’s strictly a homecoming court and whoever is voted on is in the court. It might sound petty but taking away homecoming king and queen and taking away valedictorian and salutatorian. That bothered me a lot because those individuals have worked very diligently to get where they were.
**Branding—mascot, colors, name**

The participants shared that the symbols of each school were main topics of conversation throughout the school consolidation process and it seemed that “everyone had an opinion” according to Community Member Smith. Superintendent Brown acknowledged an awareness of the importance of the symbols and traditions of the two school districts to stakeholders of the districts. It was also noted there was the need for the superintendent to not only acknowledge the existence of these attachments, but to continue to work through the emotional attachments methodically and calmly. The need to “study all the options before making any decisions for how you’re going to go forward is really important” according to Superintendent Brown. It was shared that the role of the School Board was to study the options through work sessions and meetings and “talk about, you know, things like in this scenario we would have students there, the other students somewhere else, or whatever. Um, so we talked through all those.”

Participants said the issues concerning school mascot, school colors, and, as Superintendent Brown said, “all that kind of stuff” took the longest time for resolution. Superintendent Brown also termed it “the worst part.” Alumni Student Wilson shared that when people think of a school, they think of “the sports teams, the colors, the athletes.” Based on the participants’ perceptions, it was clear that there was a general feeling that new school colors, a new mascot, new school uniforms, a new school song, and a new name for the school district would be accepted as long as one school was not favored over the other school and the students had an opportunity to participate in the selection process. Superintendent Brown said it was nice to have recommendations come from committees and especially to have students serve on those committees. “You know, we’re not, we’re not saying this and this is the kids. That’s what they want. You know, to most adults why should it matter whether we wear blue shirts or red shirts or whatever.”
The ad hoc committee assigned the task of making a recommendation on the school colors and mascot included a large group of students from various grade levels and also included community members as well as other stakeholder groups. Superintendent Brown said:

The mascot, colors, and things, because, uh, we couldn’t get an agreement and so we said, you know let’s get the adults out of the decision making of whether we’re gonna be [the mascot of West Community School District] or [the mascot of East Community School District] or whatever colors we’re gonna wear. And so, the kids, the students, started, you know, we first started with give us your suggestions, and then we [West Community School District School Board and East Community School District School Board] voted on them and we got them down to, you know, just a couple of options for each. It was really, really fun to see the students respond and pick out colors that worked really well and a mascot. To call us the [mascot of Unity Community School District] was kind of a no brainer. No one could argue with that. They had other things but that was nice because then the kids all really embraced it. And for the most part the kids’ decisions were honored by the Board. I think there was one decision we went, that was very close, and we went the other way on it. And I almost think that’s the name because the kids had grabbed the concept of a phoenix. You know, that’s kind of the [East Community School District] saying our school kind of crashed and burned and now we’re rising up, so we want to be the phoenix.

Superintendent Brown said there were some factors that helped move the decisions forward. It was shared the design for the mascot was done by a graphic designer who was a [West Community School District] graduate:
There were all kinds of drawings of what a [mascot of Unity Community School District] looks like. And then this guy out of the blue sends an image down to one of his classmates and they put it up on Facebook right away and everybody goes that’s it. And it was just like…..check.

The issue of the school song took an unique twist that led to a decision. According to Superintendent Brown and Community Member Jones, a former resident of the [East Community School District] who now lived out of state wrote the school song. The song was taught to the [Unity Community School District] band and chorus and was performed for the first time in the Spring of 2013 and “everybody kind of goes ‘yeah that’s cool,” said Superintendent Brown. Community Member Jones described that “having someone that had graduated local to write it and then to perform it for the first time at a concert was really neat. To have the composer there was very neat.”

All six participants interviewed noted the community was kept informed of the committee discussions. Superintendent Brown said the composition of the committee tasked with the school symbols and the involvement of a larger group of people for this committee was strategic. There was an understanding that there would be “a lot of information disseminated from those people to other people,” Superintendent Brown said. “You know you will have people talking about it. I’m sure there was, every coffee shop discussion probably ran around what are they doing now,” commented Superintendent Brown. All participants recognized these ongoing discussions and the need to involve the various stakeholders groups, especially the students, in the decision-making process and the importance to a perceived successful outcome.

Community Member Smith summed up the perceptions of the participants when the following was shared, “The committee took out the domination from any side of it. And they
involved the community a lot as those discussions were happening.” School colors were the first decision according to archival documents. Superintendent Brown referred to the topic of school colors as one that was “emotional and close-to-the-heart.” Superintendent Brown explained to the respective school boards at the time of the vote being taken that the process had been followed, revised with ad hoc committee consensus, implemented, and it was now time to “bring the recommendation forward to the Boards in good faith to provide the boards with the thorough work that had happened with much due diligence.”

This process of having recommendations from the ad hoc committees shared with the two Board of Educations for the final vote, was a democratic process. The amount of input into the recommendations by various stakeholders, the sharing of results of official voting leading to the recommendation(s), and the emphasis on the input of the students were important to help the School Boards feel a vote would be positively received. It was decided to have entirely new colors represent the school district and that not one of the three colors selected would be an intended dominant color.

The time spent on deciding the symbols for the newly formed school highlights the importance of these issues for the rural environment. Long-standing symbols need to be recognized and sorted through as changes are made. The methodical process of forming a committee with a varied committee membership emphasizing student input and then having this committee engaged in data-driven discussions provided a foundation for the emotionally-charged topics. By having the discussions culminate in a vote led to a recommendation based on the majority vote to the two Board of Educations represented that voices were heard and addressed and a data-driven decision was reached.
The time it took to reach the recommendation stage seemed too lengthy for one of the six participants interviewed; however, it is also noteworthy to mention that extra time was given for this committee to complete its work when it became evident to school administration that more time was needed for discussion on these, as Superintendent Brown termed it, “details that became somewhat the most controversial.” There was also the awareness that timelines needed to be adhered to to keep the whole grade sharing process moving along so the additional time given for this committee work still had a deadline though it was extended. This was significant since there was a general feeling that recommendations and decisions needed to be made and the discussion phase could only linger for so long.

*Friday night lights, etc.*

The importance of football to the rural school district was mentioned by the participants. Specifically, football had been an activity that helped bring people together especially since the football program had been successful. Community Member Jones shared:

> In small rural communities, football reigns supreme because Friday night lights is very important to people. And that is a strong tradition. You can find anybody and everybody at a football game. And they will, if the team is winning, they will just keep on drawing more people. If they start losing, they lose more and more people. And it goes with the pendulum, you’re winning everyone is excited, you’re losing, not so much.

Alumni Student Davis talked of the importance of football also. It was shared, “We won the state football championship that year which was a big moment. It helped boost school pride and unify the school. It was a defining moment for the school.”

The state football championship seemed to be a defining moment for each participant since each spoke of it but in a slightly different way. Alumni Student Wilson said when Unity Community School District won the state football championship “that was neat because I had
friends of mine and they were also teammates at the time who played on that. So, that was definitely, um, you know, cool to see.”

Community Member Smith said that “one of the biggest positives about the whole thing was winning the state football championship the first year of whole grade sharing.”

Furthermore, Community Member Smith said it made a “big difference right away when they had a winning sports team. It’s all about a winning sports team.”

Community Member Jones shared that “we were sitting at the state football championship, and we all looked around and went if there is a fire, there is not going to be anyone to put it out because the stands were packed.” Community Member Jones continued:

The entire side, one side of the [location of the game] was [Unity Community School District] and that in itself was huge to bringing everybody together. All of the individuals were wearing the new school colors. It was, a, it was a unified color. [The new school colors] were everywhere. The cheerleading uniforms, the football uniforms, and helmets, the gear that the coaches had, everything was unified and that’s what made the difference. It wasn’t them and us it was us!

**Self-perceived identity: Present vs. future image.**

Table 4.8 Participant quotations on image

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<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>The first year or two, especially the first year, uh, because people had to change their ways, you know, with transportation and, um, you know, the [East Community School District] people would say we’ve never done it that way before and the [West Community School District] people would say well we’ve never done it that way before, um, so we got a lot of calls. Um, just kind of nitpicky little items that, you know, they didn’t like. You know, we were doing the best we could but people didn’t like the way we were doing it but it was necessary. The kids came home half way through the year and said, hey I made a new friend, hey it’s kind cool up there, you know this class I got up there. And as the kids became happy, the parents go oh, this must be a good thing. And so that kind of changed in the year two. So that was, you know you put, they were, they were afraid, the kids, the first kids who got off the bus here from [East Community School District] for the high school, they were afraid. All that. Put a bunch of teenagers in a building and they get to know each other. And then they go home happy.</td>
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The six participants shared how they viewed the future and their individual and societal role in the consolidated school district. Though they each perceived the consolidated school district as a positive move for the future, there was also a longing and fond remembrance for the past.

School Board President Adams said, “I am very honored to have been a part of the consolidation, going from whole grade sharing to a full consolidation. I’m glad that that’s going to be part of my story of my life, that I was a part of it.” It was also shared by School Board President Adams that “I still feel the most comfortable at my, at [East Community School
District] because that’s where I went, you know, all through high school and it was a very good experience. But I have no qualms about going to the other.”

**Rational thought vs. emotions**

It was evident from the responses of the six participants that they had been aware throughout the process of the reaction of others to various topics as well as their own emotions and had to make choices about how these emotions would affect their thinking and actions.

There was a consistent battle to blend cognition with emotion, especially when others, especially those who were family members, expressed intense feelings. Community Member Jones said:

The apple never falls too far from the tree and so students will have the same attitude as parents and grandparents. And, if it is a negative one it probably will remain a negative one the entire time in school. And, if it is a positive one it will probably remain positive unless something drastic happens. But, I think they feed off each other. So if there is a negative going on in the school district, they bring that home, it feeds into the community conversation and, can create either a positive or a negative.

A similar feeling was expressed by Alumni Student Davis. It was felt that middle school students were especially vulnerable to the reactions of other family members. Alumni Student Davis said:

I definitely feel like middle schoolers don’t know that what they’re hearing at home might not be the most kind thing, so they’re just talking because that’s what they hear.

You know, they don’t quite understand that that is very impactful to their classmates.

Alumni Student Wilson added that there was talk among former classmates about the lack of desire to go back and watch a football game from the team that had been left. There was a feeling that “that team was gone.” Alumni Student Wilson shared:
You never went back and saw how the basketball team was doing or things that way. Um, that was kind of always, it felt a little bit like that was a, I don’t know what, social event you have to go to when you’re a freshman in college. You come back and see the school or see the homecoming game or something. You know. That didn’t really exist, that was just gone. It didn’t feel like you were coming back to watch your school. It kind of felt like you were coming back to watch someone else’s school in a way.

What is lost and what is gained

According to the participants, stakeholders recognized some of the issues with sustainability of academic programs and activities and expressed concerns about the loss of future opportunity for students and long-held practices. Superintendent Brown shared that “both districts were initially fearful of losing programs. Um, weakening programs. Um, specifically on the activities side.” It was shared by Superintendent Brown:

[East Community School District] had just gone down to eight-man football. And nobody liked that. Um, there’s a lot of financial concerns. You know, it’s going to cost more to run these kids back and forth, and, um, especially for the parents. There was concern about having to drive 24 miles instead of three to pick up your kid at a building. That’s a big change. The tax rates were another thing that when we talk about finance are my taxes going to go up. Fortunately neither district had a debt. That really became a non-issue very quickly.

An example of how individuals had to release some of what they had known in the past and adapt to a “new normal” as Alumni Student Davis termed it was in creating a school calendar. The timing of the annual commencement ceremony was a much-discussed topic. Traditionally for both school districts commencement had happened prior to Memorial Day, but contractual requirements were making this difficult to uphold. To change the date and time of
the commencement ceremony was met with resistance and became a point of contention to see which school district would “win” and get to retain their long-standing tradition. The date and time of commencement required a compromise intended to not reflect favoritism to either of the past practices held by West Community School District and East Community School District. Community Member Jones shared:

Graduation has been a little bit of an issue because a couple of years ago they switched to a Friday night graduation. Which was different for both schools. That was a change for both in general. They both had a Sunday afternoon graduation ceremony. So, everybody had to change, but it wasn’t a positive change! I don’t know who opposed it. I like the Sunday graduation, that’s the way we have always done it.

Alumni Student Wilson also shared a reflection on graduation and felt that overall the traditions of each school were respected. It was shared that “coming up with their own new kinds of things, even graduation” was a good idea. Alumni Student Wilson shared:

I think commencement is on Friday now. Maybe that’s the way [West Community School District] was but [East Community School District] was always on a Sunday. I know that was a big thing. People were like we always graduated on a Sunday. Well it’s going to be on a Friday now, it’s just the way it is. Um they did a nice job of getting new traditions and new things into the school. I think they did a good job of that.

School Board President Adams shared there was “a lot of emotion around this [whole grade sharing and school consolidation] was, this is my school. You know, what is this other school going to look like?” There was concern whether or not “the legacy of my old school will still be there. How you feel when you walk into your old high school and you think of memories and are those going to still remain once we have this different school?”
Superintendent Brown felt the point had now, six years after the beginning of the process, been reached where “I think everybody’s comfortable. You know what I mean. As far as climate, they feel like we’re [Unity Community School District].” Superintendent Brown also said, “That’s the way we are now. They don’t think back and say I wish we did that or whatever. They’re looking forward.” This point was illustrated during one of the interviews when Unity Community School District was inadvertently referred to as West Community School District. Community Member Smith quickly corrected the error and said, “Ha, that’s the problem right there, you said [West Community School District]. That’s what sports announcers say and stuff, it really grates on people.”

Summary of findings: Research Question One.

The commitment of the participants to carry out certain activities as part of a professional or assigned role was high. Furthermore, the salience of others’ expectations about them was high. Each participant had a personal role that was upheld as the process unfolded. This allowed the appropriate language, emotional display, and attitude in connection with stakeholders. The appreciation and acknowledgment in which the individuals consciously (and sometimes unconsciously) interacted within their daily conversations and routines helped build the interpretation of change that resonated with their audience and moved the process forward.

Research Question Two: How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders?

The coding system for this study allowed for the experiences to be broken into three sequential parts: (1) “process of taming;” (2) “redirection away from individual interests;” and (3) “gradual decline of interest.” In the first part, entitled “process of taming,” participants share their perspectives and the underlying dynamics of their tenacity and thoughts in the face of change. The participants were proud of what had been accomplished and attributed the
acceptance over time to the structuring and conversing as well as the provision of micromechanisms that linked macrostates across time. The explication of cognitive structures along with the mobilization of resistance helped direct the social interactions and thought processes. Community Member Jones shared that “[the superintendent] was in contact with the state constantly to make sure that we were doing every step along the way properly.” It was also felt that the [the superintendent] had put the best people possible in the positions of leadership for various committees. “When we got to the vote,” said Community Member Jones, “we did not want to be over confident, but we had a very good feeling, a very solid foundation to say that this is going to move forward without protest.” Community Member Jones continued by saying:

And what surprised all of us, was that we did not have one person come forward and ask to have their children go elsewhere because of this merger. Nor did they request to have their property taken out of the district to go into another neighboring district that was close or connected to. And the [state resource agency] hearing lasted six minutes for approval of the merger. So, it was smoother than anything that I have been a part of as far as process and the details were very well taken care of.

Experiences. The six participants made the external surroundings (the situation) in front of them into internal surroundings in their minds. The individual participants were consciously reorganizing their lenses to view the world in which they lived, worked, and socialized and, in doing so, they deliberately reestablished ways of concerning themselves with the world.
Experiences: Process of taming—making sense out of chaos.

Table 4.9 Participant quotations on planning

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<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>Whenever we came across one of those hiccups we had to have a discussion about how do we do this, we had enough open communication, and uh, discussions with our people and administration to come to some type of consensus. Wasn’t always, you know, this is the way we do it, this is the way it’s going to be. It was all a lot of compromise.</td>
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<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>People are just a buzz about did you see this, did you see that. Then when it comes to the negative. Why is that person still coaching? Why are they not doing better than they are? Why is, why, why, why. Then it starts to stir and then fester that can cause a problem.</td>
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<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>There is still grumbling and it’s usually the people that don’t have any involvement in the school. They just can’t change their ways. They did a lot of interviewing of students right afterwards and they would put out articles about, the students don’t really notice the change they just have more faces in their hall. So, the students changed the easiest.</td>
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<td>Alumni Student Wilson</td>
<td>It’s not that I was negative towards it, but I don’t think that I really supported it when I was a senior. There were people who wanted to just leave the whole thing and go to a different school. I would have pushed them to buy in more, and I eventually did. It is not as if I would have made a huge impact, but I think that would have been helpful. I wish more people would have been advocates for the whole process.</td>
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<td>Alumni Student Davis</td>
<td>Administration seemed a little bit concerned with putting school rivals in the same building so they tried to build relationships by having an assembly on the first day they [students from East Community School District] came and in that assembly recognizing this is what’s going on and ‘these are the expectations for you so buckle up,’ but outside of that there was never really a need for an assembly.</td>
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<td>School Board President Adams</td>
<td>We had to get to a point where we had to limit speaking, um, or we would have been there for days. Um, you know, everyone has a voice and we wanted to hear their voice to be heard. Uh, we started videotaping our meetings, we livestreamed them on our website so that they were available. Um, we had a lot of meetings and then, uh, again, we would break into groups and go out into the community and, I mean I spoke at, you know, like fireman meetings or church meetings or like the veteran’s club or just different clubs in the area that wanted us to come and answer questions in a more intimate setting. Um so we did a lot of that, and then once the information got out, people learned what we were doing.</td>
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In this section, I will discuss the explication of predecisional activities and how the micro-mechanism was formed to produce macro-change over time. In the sub-sections that follow I will discuss how the experiences of the participants initially began with chaos and organizing flux.
When pigs fly—vision.

Complex change without vision leads to confusion. Change happens because there is a guiding force behind what is being done to bring about change and this guiding force can be referred back to during the process. As Community Member Jones shared, “It really came down to the vision of [the superintendent].” The participants said some of the first comments that came out in the beginning were that [East Community School District] was just going to “get swallowed up” by [West Community School District] because “they’re bigger.” The superintendent, according to Community Member Jones, made “every effort to let people know that this is cooperation and not competition” and that “we are working to make this better for all not just for the one or the other one.” It was felt that this articulated the mission and vision very clearly from the beginning and that was critical. Besides the superintendent, credit was given to many people who assumed leadership positions and who were able to influence others.

Superintendent Brown gave credit to the Board presidents of the two School Boards. It was shared that both Board presidents were expecting to retire from the Board when reorganization occurred “so there wasn’t a battle to see who gets to be president of the new Board.” According to Superintendent Brown, both Board presidents “had the vision and could see what was going to come of this and supported it fully all the way through.” Credit was also given to Board members but Superintendent Brown said “it’s still that leadership guy that makes it keep going. And, without them, you know, it might not have been as successful to reorganize or if it would have been somebody else he might have said no we’re not going to do this.”

It was believed this attention to vision caused stakeholders to understand the future in ways consistent with their perceived reality so change could occur. This continuous attention toward goal-oriented thinking promoted the, according to Community Member Jones, “vision for down the road, rather than focusing on the here and now” which helped the process steadily
move forward. It was important to see “the vision beyond today, and know that this opportunity was not going to present itself again,” said Community Member Jones.

The participants felt the establishment of a vision began when stakeholders started realizing that other school districts had been approached by the [East Community School District] to determine interest in possible partnerships, and the [West Community School District] was the only one who had answered positively for that year. Anxiety set in and Superintendent Brown knew the attitude displayed by the superintendent about the decision “would help set the tone for others.” Community Member Jones said there were several people on the Citizens Advisory Committee that “I really enjoyed watching because they had a talent for handling certain individuals that they knew regardless what the topic was they were going to try and stir. And, it just stopped it. And it got the other people who were kind of starting to follow that individual to realize that we really have no need to follow or that’s not right. So, it was interesting.”

*Shift from top-down to bottom-up--leadership.*

It was evident through the comments of the participants that leadership was a key element and helped provide the means by which the environment was altered. There was a demand for leadership and this demand was met. Community Member Jones said “the leadership of the superintendent was the key point for us to go through this successfully.” Words such as “calm,” “informed,” “professional” and “educated” were used to describe the superintendent. Though the superintendent took a leadership role especially with data and state mandates, people did not rely on one single person to be responsible for the school district’s progress with the plan or for sustainability. Many people were given credit for facilitation and guidance of committee work, for sharing information with other stakeholders, and for speaking up when incorrect information
entered into conversations. Leadership was provided in the form of the superintendent; school board members as a group and individually; community members, especially those who served on committees; and students who were especially noted for providing the guiding vision, enthusiasm, and commitment that allowed Unity Community School District to form.

Community Member Jones talked about the importance of having continuity with leadership and the need to have leaders “staying with and until the merger took place.” There was a general feeling, as expressed by four of the six participants, there was value in having the superintendent and high school principal, as said by Community Member Jones, “stay through the merger itself and then make decisions for themselves regarding their own careers.” Community Member Jones also said that the superintendent “saw the value in staying and I think also the more involved [the superintendent] got, the more meaningful it was to [the superintendent]. It was felt that when [the superintendent] committed to stay through the merger process, people felt more secure and stable and more confident that this was the right thing to do. Community Member Jones said [the superintendent] knew the personalities of the people involved and was very conscious of working collaboratively with, versus pitting people against each other. The two participants who did not comment specifically on the need for specific leaders to retain their roles were the alumni students and it was simply an absence of comment rather than negative comment.

Over the course of the two interviews, Superintendent Brown spoke frankly of many aspects of the school consolidation process and the role played by the superintendent and others in the process. It was evident, however, through the conversations will all of the participants that change initially did need to be advanced from the top level. An initialization from the top worked because respect was present for the top level and there was a readiness for
implementation to be accepted by the people who were involved. It was also important for the superintendent to keep in contact with legislators to “know where things are going with education and offering support where appropriate and questioning why things are being done in other ways,” according to Community Member Jones.

There was little recall by the superintendent for the details involved in the process, including those moments that involved naysayers. Also, there was little recall of the emotions that were expressed by various stakeholders throughout the process. This was in contrast to the recollections of the other five participants. There seemed to be a sense of detachment by the superintendent for the emotional side of the process and a greater concentration on the self-identified role as the person “to keep the process moving forward.” Superintendent Brown concentrated the shared reflections on the plans – both long term and short term – in devising the process and then in implementing the plan. Comments by the superintendent centered on the leadership and management that had been intentional and informed by changing conditions. The comments by the other five participants tended to stray toward personal examples of emotions that had been expressed. All participants acknowledged that everyone needed to work together to answer questions. Superintendent Brown said:

I guess I can’t speak for them. I don’t know how much the public leaned on them for information or for decisions or, you know, trying to, uh, push them one way or another. I know they had a lot of questions come to them and they were probably like me, you know, busy with phone calls and things and people wanting to know the answer to something. Um, so I’m sure it was a busy time.
Superintendent Brown mentioned the means of getting information to stakeholders and the perceived importance in getting information to people in a timely way. An informational webpage was established and this webpage was open to the public. Superintendent Brown said:

We had a rule about getting minutes up on that within 48 hours of committee meetings. And, I think that was critical. We sort of made a communication plan and I think that plan, when we released information and how we prepared people for the changes coming up, I think that was an important part there. But it was important to communicate as much as we could, because the public was asking what’s happening with this and what’s happening with that. So, it was, as soon as we had an answer to that, we let them know it. Most of it was on the webpage but we used our newsletter and other communications to keep everybody up to speed. We were pushing it out as either an email or a newsletter that comes to them. I have found that a lot of times people won’t go out of their way to find things. And that’s part of rumor control too, because the longer you wait on informing people on decision A or decision B, the more they’re going to wonder and pass on half-truths and stuff that they heard.

The work of the committees was noted often and there was mention of the leadership provided by the chairpersons of the committees. It was mentioned by Superintendent Brown:

We had those five committees where we split up the content, what their discussions were going to be instead of just having one whole grade sharing committee doing everything. I made sure the principals of both schools were co-chairs of the academic committees. And the uh, uh, activities committee and the policy committee you know those all the same way. You know, we had principals or lead teachers of some type chair those committees.
Two participants, Superintendent Brown and School Board President Adams, shared it had been beneficial to meet and talk with administration from a neighboring school district which had been involved in whole grade sharing. As School Board President Adams said, “They were a wealth of information. It was like an open door. Anytime we had questions we could call or email.” Also these same two participants talked of support from state School Board Association and attendance at conferences which had speakers on school consolidation and this had been helpful.

**Busy as a bee—collaboration, communication, and awareness.**

Participants discussed the role of communication at every step of the process and addressed the means by which the environment was altered through this communication. Words used by participants to describe this area included: “asking questions,” “listening,” “transparency,” and “getting things in front of people.” Use of these skills helped alleviate the anxiety among the people involved and prepared people to do the work and understand the work needed for change. Consistent across participant responses was the importance of “listening.” Participants gave examples regarding why they needed to listen and give opportunity for people to ask questions, which Superintendent Brown described as being necessary even though there was a vast amount of information that was needing to be covered in a relatively short amount of time. Superintendent Brown said there was a consistent message of “listen we got to get, we’ve got to have a decision now. If you don’t have a deadline, it just goes on and on and on. Um, and so, having that deadline was probably a good thing.” Community Member Jones felt that most of the decisions “moving forward came from a consensus of a collaborative effort.”

Once initial conversations began, it was evident there was a need to link decisions that had been made on the strategical level with the operational level. This was done by motivating
the community to understand that the task and the eventual mission of Unity Community School District was important and that their work was important in defining the new mission the school was undertaking. When participants knew their work was going to be acknowledged and honored, the committee work was approached with a greater level of enthusiasm. This engagement of the stakeholders in the school district encouraged them to collaborate and work on organizational goals rather than individual interests. The start of the transformational awareness of task importance and value, caused the focus to be on team or organizational goals, rather than individual interests. This focus activated higher order needs such as belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

“Transparency” was a word used to describe the way information was disseminated. School Board President Adams said, “I really, really felt like we did a good job communicating every step of the way and just letting people ask questions and having those public hearings. We wanted to be transparent.” Alumni Student Davis spoke of how important it was to “talk as it’s happening and just share openly rather than waiting until you have a decision reached. Transparency is really key for stuff like that.” Alumni Student Davis felt also that there was an awareness of whether the “students were comfortable with what was going on” and a genuine desire to involve and listen to the students.

An online information page was established and this provided a vehicle for individuals to ask questions and receive information. The superintendent posted answers to the questions placed on the online information page and the responses given often had data to support the response. The superintendent would also occasionally provide additional, clarifying comments accompanied by initials to indicate the source of the comments, especially if the comments could be interpreted as more inflammatory in nature. For example, a question was posted concerning
whether the discussion of whole grade sharing was more of a “good neighbor” and good faith effort and if the West Community School District would have the courage to back out if there were financial or other concerns. Superintendent Brown responded with initials attached that this “is a serious issue that we intend to pursue to execution.” The response also included the whole grade sharing agreement and the explanation that consolidation is more about “maintaining quality programs than anything else and both districts are committed to do what is best for our students. However, we [West Community School District and East Community School District] both have the right to back out if we sense we can’t strike a fair deal.”

Superintendent Brown shared how committees were essential in reaching out to others. It was shared that 400 signatures were needed on the “reorganization vote.” A certain number of signatures needed to be from each school district and, to accomplish this, a committee was formed with the committee members contacting community members to secure signatures. Superintendent Brown said signature pages “were at the ball games” and people were asked to sign and “there were a good number of people who didn’t want to sign. They were against it. They’d say well I’m not against it but I don’t want my name on it.” This was disheartening to Superintendent Brown since it was felt “why don’t you just sign it for us and we’ll get it, we’ll get this done.” Superintendent Brown said, “I was trying to stay in the background of it” but also shared there was a conversation with a group of people gathered at a local meeting space for coffee and:

I stopped in and we sat there and talked, and they had a lot of good questions and by the time it got done all but one was nodding their head going okay, sounds good. And most of them signed it. There was one that sat there and said no way. She had an issue for the [West Community School District]. Something had gone wrong at some point.
Community Member Jones shared when the committee was going out to gather signatures for the petition, it was an “opportune time to have conversations. They may be difficult, but have that cheat sheet, have those frequently asked questions and share information.”

Community Member Jones shared there was a map of what the district would look like so people would know the boundaries and people would ask “why are we doing it this way, can’t we keep things the same.” The meetings between Community Member Jones and others were described as a “conversation” about the decline in population within rural areas with the emphasis on a need for a “team effort”, and the need to recognize the distance to other neighboring school districts was even further than what this situation presented. It was stressed this was an “opportunity.” Community Member Jones shared:

[There was] a great deal of discussion about bussing and how far children were going to have to be bussed and how long they would have to be on the bus. And, would there be shuttle buses to the outlying communities which are part of the whole process.

It was expressed by the participants that there were many individuals who were involved in the communication of the plan. These individuals need to be knowlegable, but also seek information from other credible sources if an answer was not known. Superintendent Brown said, “The committees were kind of large so that’s a lot of opinions to bounce back and forth.” Community Member Jones shared that:

any kind of information I asked for, the administration provided immediately or provided a web site to look at to the state and any other general information. I never had an issue with feeling that anything was being protected or hidden or not given to anyone.
Besides the administration providing information, the committees needed to be communicating with one another and sharing information as needed. Community Member Jones said:

If one committee got to a point that they couldn’t move forward and they needed information from another committee then the chairs of those two committees would meet and iron out whatever it was or maybe two committees would meet together and talk about details that needed to cross over in some capacity. But, everything was going on at the same time and so I think people felt like there was movement constantly. It wasn’t a stall out at any point. Someone was always working on something, new information was coming out. [The superintendent] did a great job with the newsletter and the [local newspapers] all need a lot of kudos for supporting the school district with the articles that were written, the features that were put in. As the Citizens Advisory Committee, when we got to that point we asked to have interviews with certain students or certain age of students to see where they were in the whole grade sharing or merger and how that impacted them. The faculty members, some of the community members, most who were not on the committee because we wanted other individuals who may not have been as involved to talk about it. But, those highlights were important to let the community know that, this is a good thing, here is the vision, why we are doing it, and we would appreciate your support.

Honesty and openness were two characteristics that were valued. Alumni Student Wilson said administrators need to “be as clear and open as they can with everyone. The members of the school board, the general public.” There was acknowledgment that “some stuff maybe you can’t
tell the public at times until its readily available information, but whatever that you can let them know I would do that.” Alumni Student Wilson said:

It’s a big change for a community and rumors definitely get going and if you can get that information out there and let people know, I think that you are better off just having that be clear for everybody. To those people who are the teachers and the students who are really involved in it, I would say to go at it with an open mind because you don’t know what it is until you get into it. So, see what it is before you make a judgment.

*What’s in it for me— incentives.*

All participants in the study noted their role within the rural environment had an effect on their thoughts about school consolidation. Interpretation was the process in which the participants actively grasped their relationship to the issue. To interpret the encountered situation was connected to a frame of reference or point of view which, for the participants, was the identity of each and the role(s) each played in the school consolidation process. As School Board President Adams shared, “People were concerned about how is this affecting me. And me happened to be if they were a property owner, it they were a parent of a student, a grandparent of a student. You know, whatever their role was in life.”

There was a need for rewards, recognitions, and celebrations to keep stakeholders involved. Without this involvement, there may have been change but it likely would have been more gradual. Unity Community School District had approximately eight months to figure out how to whole grade share and the rewards, recognitions, and celebrations helped make what may have taken years to accomplish be encapsulated into a few months. The rewards or recognitions many times simply came in the form of being asked for an opinion or being asked to join a
committee. Stakeholders felt valued because their opinions were valued. The recognition came from knowing opinions were sought, heard, and then considered.

School Board President Adams said, “If I were to give advice to others, I would tell people that when they’re starting to pull ideas together, involve as many people that are interested in being a part of it.” It was shared that people in the community wanted to be a part of the change and, according to School Board President Adams, “having different views at the table is always a good thing.” Superintendent Brown said there was a consistent desire to have the message of “we are two districts combining and not a big district taking over concept.”

Community Member Smith commented on the need for stability in leadership to maintain some institutional knowledge. It was shared:

I know that [Superintendent Brown] had said that [Superintendent Brown] would stay at least one year through this merger. [Superintendent Brown] has been through all the whole grade sharing and committed to stay one more year through the first year of the consolidation. I think people have realized that and appreciated that. A really good faith effort because [Superintendent Brown] lives out of the district and travels here.

School Board President Adams spoke of the need to keep focused on the agreed outcome and having an “open mind from both ends and just coming into it willing or expecting to make a change or expecting to be accepting of the other district.” There needs to be a willingness “to agree on an ending and then how you’re going to work toward that. Have that goal, set goals together I guess.”

Alumni Student Wilson also reflected on the outcome and shared that consolidation is “probably good for you in the long run. You don’t want to be shrinking. If you’re shrinking,
you’re dying.” Alumni Student Wilson said it felt as if the school district was bigger, “you may be able to withstand some of the struggles school districts do have.”

There was a general acknowledgment that the world is changing and therefore schools are also changing. Community Member Jones said:

Things change and one of our goals when we had our facilities committee many years ago was we wanted to create an environment that was the destination district. When it was [West Community School District] by itself we wanted to be a destination district for arts and athletics. One of the best investments that we ever made was that fine arts facility. That was something [East Community School District] did not have. And, then when they came to [West Community School District], because they loved their performing arts but now they had a venue. What a wonderful thing for them to have.

*Good enough for me—resources.*

Resources were the money, time, and materials needed to get the job done. The participants remarked there were concerns from stakeholders on whether adequate resources were available. These concerns about adequate resources needed to be consistently addressed otherwise the concerns became a focus and a barrier at times. The questions about resources became one of not only having adequate resources but one of the stakeholders having a desire to use the resources to continue on with the plan. It was acknowledged by the participants it was difficult for some to invest the money, time and materials to make the planned changes.

Community Member Jones said:

I think that it was some older members of the community that had to go to either school, that their children had gone through the school now their grandchildren were in school. It has always worked. It’s just fine, why are we changing?” But to me it was more of the
older generation of thinking it has always been done this way, why do we have to change? It was good enough for me!

One of the areas that was addressed early in the whole grade sharing process was the issue of operational sharing, as explained in chapter three. This was the sharing of managerial personnel in the discrete operational function areas of superintendent management, business management, human resource management, student transportation management, and facility maintenance management. The state Department of Education offered incentives to make sharing agreements attractive to school districts. These financial incentives did seem to positively influence the stakeholders to embrace the operational changes.

For some stakeholders, it was difficult to make change because this seemed to negate the lives they had chosen to lead. School Board President Adams shared the surprise felt at how many parents did not “want opportunity for their kids and there were parents out there that didn’t want their kids to leave. They wanted them to stay in the district or in their home and not be any better than them, it was really sad.” School Board President Adams continued by saying, “You know, I always want the best for my kids, I always want those opportunities, but there are parents out there that don’t want those opportunities for their kids and that was really a shock to my system.” It was described that “those are the parents that pushed back. They didn’t want their kids to be any better than them. You know, what they had was good enough. It’s good enough for me, it’s good enough for my kids.”

Community Member Jones shared a memory about serving on the committee for the fine arts center. The committee used a three-legged stool as a symbol for athletics, arts, and academics. The three-legged stool became a symbol for the committee of how to allocate resources. Community Member Jones said:
You need to think of all of those things when you are combining two districts. Where do you stand in each of those areas? Is one stronger than the others and how are you going to keep that strength? You know if somebody else has a different strength and how do you keep that strength to combine them.

Resources needed to be allocated to make changes in school symbols and branding. This strategic branding of the Unity Community School District, as evidenced through archival documents, involved signage and the prominent display of the newly formed school district’s name. As Community Member Jones said, “There was a need to get the mindset that this is who we are.” Community Member Smith said staff were told not to wear [West Community School District or East Community School District] clothing but they had “to wear [Unity Community School District] attire. They were directly told that.” The name Unity Community School District was placed on all the school buses and the high school industrial technology classes fabricated a metal sign with the district’s name and this was placed on the high school building. Community Member Jones said, “These may seem like small things, but they are very important things that everyone is identified within the organization.”

Superintendent Brown spoke of branding efforts and specifically of signage that was placed at the entrance of the high school building:

You know, the [Unity Community School District] sign down at the bottom, that was a [West Community School District] sign with a [West Community School District mascot] and logo on it, and we had ordered a new sign with the [Unity Community School District’s logo] and stuff like that. It wasn’t put up until the morning of the first day of school and I didn’t know that. I was going when are we going to get our sign,
when are we going to get our sign. Well, [the sign maker] was waiting for that morning for, when that [East Community School District’s] bus comes down that hill is the first time those kids will see their identity. I thought that, that was really cool.

Though the decision about school colors had been one that had required more time and discussion than some of the other issues, archival documents reveal that evidence of these decisions was becoming reality by May 2013. The high school building was slated for repainting of the interior hallways and there were plans to cover the current stripes with stripes in the new school colors.

The whole grade sharing time period had given the time needed for the students and others to think of the Unity Community School District as one school district rather than think of the West Community School District or the East Community School District as distinct schools within the one district. There was not a fully realized combining of all aspects of Unity Community School District until the consolidation happened, but the patrons of the district began to operate as one district for most purposes when whole grade sharing began. The feeling of being a part of Unity Community School District began to settle in within a few months of whole grade sharing and Community Member Jones related, “It wasn’t even a question for people to think, that is who we are. And, that’s what you wanted was the understanding, the appreciation, the respect that makes it our district, and we are proud of it.”

Alumni Student Wilson recalled the football team had a [Unity Community School District] sign at the end zone in the first year of whole grade sharing that was a symbolic sign to the team and to the school. Alumni Student Wilson shared that “they just did some things that were new and that weren’t the tradition of the [West Community School District] or the [East
Community School District] but now became a tradition of the [Unity Community School District].”

Furthermore, there had been many comments made about increased opportunities for students. School Board President Adams put these increased opportunities into specific activities when it was said:

Without a doubt in my mind, we made the right decision to consolidate the schools. Just the opportunities that we’re providing for kids in our districts is so much better than what it was. I hear it time and time again from students that they would have never been able to be on the bowling team or the trap shooting team or be part of a competitive sporting events or competitive music programs if we didn’t combine our numbers and create such a strong program. And, yeah, I just think opportunity has increased immensely.

Community Member Jones shared music has been a “unifying factor.” It was shared that “the choral program was very strong at [East Community School District] and the choral program was very strong at [West Community School District].” The directors of the respective programs “got along beautifully and that really helped in a completely different way from athletics, but at the same time it is a team, a team effort and so those individuals working so close together.”

Community Member Jones also shared the importance of how the faculty, staff and administration embraced the change. It was shared:

Now were they happy about all of it? Not necessarily. Were they happy about reassignments to go to [East Community School District] as opposed to [West Community School District]? Shifting of classroom and what not? It was not all peaches and cream but they embraced it and made it work.
Superintendent Brown talked about the work of the stakeholders to combine organizations and embrace the change. “I think it’s unified. You know, this is year six. We’re actually one school district now,” commented Superintendent Brown.

The adults have put their boosters together. We have boosters from both. Music boosters from both and things like that. Uh, even their dollars for scholar programs have become unified. And so, adult organizations for each district, they just came together just like the kids did. And so, that’s why I say I think they’re, they’re pretty unified on things going on. I think it’s a relatively positive thought of the school district.

Alumni Student Wilson reflected on the positive aspect of having more students to participate in activities. It was shared that it may be good to have bigger teams and “more competitive teams” because of having more people. Alumni Student Wilson said:

I think that I was a little jealous of that at times because we were always playing with just enough people on a team. You know we had just enough people even for a drama like play or something. You had just enough people to get it done. They had more resources and maybe jealous of that, but still very happy with my high school experience.

School Board President Adams said:

Once we were out in the public and, you know, voicing what we see as benefits, as the opportunities and things like that, then I think more parents and more community members got on board with, you know, what we were doing. Huge questions around taxes. You know, will our income, or will our property taxes go up and, you know at first we didn’t have a good answer for that. We hoped that they wouldn’t and they actually went down so that was based on, you know, some approvals of funds and things like that.
so they were happy to see that. So that was good. It wasn’t a focus on the bigger picture, it was about how is this affecting me.

School Board President Adams referred that it was “tough to be part of” some of the conversations that involved negative feelings being expressed about individuals and “They have their own agenda. I, I could see it, it looked like that, I think, from some standpoint.” According to three of the participants, there was one School Board member who was against the whole grade sharing. School Board President Adams reflected that:

working with him was, and, and I like him as a person, you know, we got along fine, but getting phone calls from him and trying to, he trying to influence me to go his way, I mean, that was one thing I wasn’t comfortable with. It was tough. He tried to influence us not to go down that path and, you know, we just kind of have to step back and, you know, what do we truly believe. You know, what we’ve been taught, I mean everyone’s been taught the same thing. Everyone was at the same meetings. How you took that information and, um, yeah, I guess he could just not change his mind on anything.

School Board President Adams shared:

We needed to figure out what we were going to do in the future to be able to educate our students. The work sessions contained people from the community. It contained parents, students, alumni, business people. We even had, our population contains a lot of home school families. If there was anything, you know, we could provide to them as a resource or maybe they would change their mind and bring, I mean we included everybody, every demographic we could think of in the area that may have input on, on our decision.

School Board President Adams said some of the bigger challenges have been with naysayers and the challenges around transportation. Superintendent Brown said some changes in
transportation were “a hard pill to swallow for some of the kids, some of the parents and stuff. Um, but they got used to it.” To maintain the trust, Superintendent Brown recognized that one School Board could not be favored over the other. Superintendent Brown shared:

And somebody says well yeah, I think we could do it like this and, uh, then you walk away and go, oh we can’t do that. And that made, you know, especially if you’re trying to put something together, if you tell the one board well the thing you wanted to do, we can’t do it, then there’s going to be distrust. And, uh, we avoided that, so that was good.

Superintendent Brown continued, “My communication with the Board presidents increased during the time we were working out the whole grade sharing details. I didn’t want anyone to be caught off guard. I wanted them to be prepared for questions.” Superintendent Brown said the Board presidents were “always in step with what I was doing.” It was also indicated by Superintendent Brown that “there’s the fact that a lot of times the Board members follow the president, if he, he’s been a longstanding and a good president which is what we had.”

There were some lingering feelings that the smaller school had been consumed by the larger school. It was beneficial to have more resources but there had been some loss to gain those resources. Alumni Student Wilson shared:

On the [East Community School District] side of things, and I don’t know exactly what the outside view was, but we always kind of just felt like small school, we’re just going to do our best to see what we can do. We maybe don’t have the best resources, but we are going to work hard at what we can do and maybe we’ll be successful and everything. To be honest on the [West Community School District] side now it feels a lot like they just kind of have everything they want. They had a nicer facility. They have a big auditorium. Um, they feel a little bit like the big brother of the conference now. They
kind of feel like they’re high and mighty in the area now. Whereas before it felt a little bit like well we’re just here doing our own thing on the [East Community School District] side of things. Now they’re the big one in the, in the, area, in the conference.

**Experiences: Redirection away from individual interests.**

Table 4.10 Participant quotations on making progress for the benefit of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>I guess from the time we started talking about it to when we voted was six months. Um, nine would have been better for that. Um, you get going, and maybe a year, but if you go more than a year, I think, you would just drag up too many issues. I think less than a year is better, nine months.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>It was about the values and beliefs. Strong athletic traditions. Strong athletic expectations. If someone would try to come in and try to override that without incorporating it, there would be backlash. The bigger challenges were the activities. You know the, are we, what color are we going to be. What uniform are we going to wear? Um, all those things. Uh, you know, because parents grow up, they’re a [mascot of East Community School District] and they want to see their kid wearing a [mascot of East Community School District] uniform. Now that, that wasn’t going to happen anymore. Um, fortunately the people that had their eyes on the academics, um, ruled the day and we kept the process going.</td>
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<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>I don’t know if anybody will ever agree this was the right decision but in my personal opinion, yes. And, I think, uh, I think it was pretty obvious that the separate schools would struggle a lot if they did not combine some of their resources, combine some of the their staff to provide more benefits for the students.</td>
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<td>Alumni Student Wilson</td>
<td>Before it [whole grade sharing] there was definitely some tension. Um, the, uh, we played [East Community School District played West Community School District] in a basketball game. I think the game was right before the vote that they were going to have for whole grade sharing. I felt like it was one of the more intense environments that we played a game in, in my four years there. It’s just a basketball game, it’s not like it’s that big of a deal really.</td>
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<td>Alumni Student Davis</td>
<td>[There was] chatter about money and stuff like that but making it more about the students and more about the culture then more about the money, because if it is really meant to happen, you know, then the money will come. Your priority is the students and their comfort and their happiness. You can pay all the money in the world to combine buildings and have people switch and pay bus drivers but if there’s no one on your bus what’s the point.</td>
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<td>School Board President Adams</td>
<td>Um (pause), I know there were, not having high school events at [East Community School District] location was, was a tough pill to swallow for some. Um, this last winter, there was a scheduling conflict and we did end up having a [East Community School District] or having a [Unity Community School District] varsity game at our location and we packed the gym. And we even had some people that you would never see at the [West Community School District] gym come to the [East Community School District] gym wearing their [East Community School District] gear. People had been pretty careful about representing the new district by wearing the new school colors but this was their one night to step away from that. They were proud of their community.</td>
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**Emphasis on students.** This section captures the positive causal linkage of what is believed and the negative causal linkage of what is doubted. Based on the comments of the participants, there was a positive attitude toward and support of the school district, especially when the increased opportunities for students was the topic, but there was also a lingering feeling that the blending of the two school districts’ programs and classes would be problematic.

Superintendent Brown said, “We’ve kept the kids as the focus. Um, we didn’t do this [whole grade share] to save money, which is why we keep all the programs we have. I think everybody did a good job of keeping in mind this is for the kids and what is going to work best for them.” Superintendent Brown reflected that one of the easiest parts of the process had been “putting the people together.” It was shared, “There’s been some complaining but then everybody just kinda says that’s what we, that’s what we gotta do. That’s our new reality.”

The forming of the ad hoc committees with active student involvement was key in getting a larger group of people informed and have them assume a responsibility in having a positive result. The role of the students on the committees was mentioned by all participants and this helped put the emphasis on student interests and desires.

Alumni Student Wilson shared that:

What kind of helped was people just realizing that, um, this was probably something that was going to happen. Pushing back on it is probably only going, um, mess up the process of it. People started to realize, it’s probably what’s best for the kids. Gives them more opportunities hopefully and, uh, in that way it will be better for the future of the school and the future of the graduates which would, should be the betterment of the community. If you have better graduates.
Superintendent Brown shared that “when you’re a really tiny school district, there’s always the top students. If the kids are always in the same class, the top kid in class is always the same one. That’s the kid. There’s the, aw, okay, he’s, he’s the guy.” Superintendent Brown said students have better opportunities for “academic dialogue” or the ‘deeper and more diverse” conversations when there are more students in the classroom. It was also shared that another thing that made whole grade sharing work so well was that those students “understood the need for the sharing and the um (pause), the climate that they wanted to develop kind of in there. They were, um strong academic kids, and strong in activities. And they worked together pretty well.”

The original whole grade sharing agreement was for three years. The review of archival documents including superintendent notes from board meetings and notes taken from work sessions of the boards reveals there were concerns the whole grade sharing agreement would not last beyond three years and the costs associated with expenditures such as new school uniforms would be for naught. Superintendent Brown responded to this concern by saying, “the permanence of the agreement is based upon how welcome each student body is.” It seemed to be a consistent challenge to insure community members that the whole grade sharing was not the beginning of a bigger plan to, as Community Member Smith shared, “shut down the school and take everything to [a community in the West Community School District].” There was no information shared through the interviews or through review of archival documents that would support the topic of a subversive plan to shut down a school.

Don’t spread the gravel before you build the road—action plan.

Prior frames of mind often prevent people from seeing a problem from different viewpoints or being able to change their perspectives. In this study, engaging in knowledge practices and processes that are part of ongoing relationships with others developed the shared understanding of the goal. This collective effort helped with making sense of the issues. The
action plan was broken down into steps that people could take and accomplish in small bits so false starts were avoided. Stakeholders needed the plan to guide them so they did not take off in a certain direction, only to realize that an important step was skipped, forcing them to stop their progress and go back and take care of it. Action was always a tiny bit ahead of cognition and participants acted their way to belated understanding. The participants felt that all individuals had the opportunity to participate in some way and have their opinions heard.

The whole grade sharing information page that was developed along with a posted survey on name, colors, and mascot was available for all interested individuals to read and to post questions and concerns. This information page was monitored and, as Superintendent Brown said, “What could have been troubling issues did not appear to be too bad.” It was understood that, as Superintendent Brown said, there was “a fear of the unknown. I think anytime there’s change, people are afraid.” Superintendent Brown said people expressed concern that they did not know “those teachers over there or whatever the case was. Things as simple as where do I park.” There were concerns about staff reductions and if the district would “lose some of our good teachers.” Superintendent Brown said staff had choices and could apply for a location. The administrative team made decisions on staffing, according to Superintendent Brown, but it was based on teacher request. It was also shared “there was a couple [teachers] who had to move that didn’t like that, didn’t want to. And, uh, we just said well this is for the best of the district and we’re going to do it. It all worked out.”

Five of the six participants mentioned personnel issues, especially those involving staffing of extra-curricular activities. School Board President Adams described the selection of who the coaching staff would be as a “pressure point.” It was shared:
I know it felt like [school administrators] favored [West Community School District] from a coaching aspect. Um, they had better records, they had maybe the more experienced coaching staff. Um, that, we had some students and parents who felt like they did not get a fair chance to participate in some sports because of, because of who we chose for coaching staff. Um, we definitely, I had many conversations of well it’s healthy to have competition. You had to work hard. You had to compete to be, to find a spot on the team. Our sports did improve and, you know, we had some good coaches I felt like, that came from the [East Community School District] that left because they weren’t chosen as a main coach or we couldn’t keep them.

In response to staffing and how the issues surrounding staffing could have been approached differently, Superintendent Brown had the following to say:

Um, I guess just in the, in the day to day things we’d probably take a closer look at some of the changes in personnel that we did or did not make. Uh, we tried to put the people in the right places academically and I think (pause) I’m pretty okay with how that turned out. Um, the extracurricular stuff has had some, uh, ups and downs for us. Uh, we just had our, our approach on who is going to be the coaches, for example was the high school will have their high school coaches take over the programs. And, then at the middle school those coaches will run the middle school programs. Um, we had a couple of people, um, that resigned from their coaching. Over the course of the last three or four years, that’s probably settled down some as people have worked out their roles a little bit more. There’s still some people that are still, uh, not too happy with how it’s going (fingers drumming on table). But there’s always people that aren’t happy by how things are going.
Alumni Student Wilson shared names of previous athletic coaches and how it was perceived the coaches had been respected and treated as staffing decisions were made. Specifically, Alumni Student Wilson felt the [East Community School District] football coach “didn’t get much credit for pushing people toward the idea of whole grade sharing. [Coach] kind of changed their minds and said no you can be part of the transition. You can be part of the change.” Alumni Student Wilson felt this was even more remarkable because:

[Coach] kind of pushed for the whole grade sharing probably knowing [coach] was going to lose his coaching job, because he coached at [East Community School District]. You know he has another job now. He was hugely supportive in the [whole grade sharing] process and essentially supported himself right out of a coaching job. I don’t think he got a lot of credit for that, but being, I was pretty close to him myself, and, uh, kind of being, playing football and stuff, get to know, know him, but he didn’t get much credit for being a supporter of the process.

The effort to provide a means for individuals to be heard and responded to was significant in keeping people engaged and informed. As School Board President Adams shared, “I looked forward to brainstorming and working with others and it was almost fun. I mean I looked forward to having those meetings rather than, oh no, you know, not another meeting.” School Board President Adams said, “You always came out of it feeling, like you had a big job to do and I felt important to play that role that I did, I guess. I felt honored to be part of that.”

School Board President Adams shared that “once people found out what we were thinking about doing and what was kind of brought up, people come out with opinions.” It was acknowledged that “everyone has an opinion” and it is good to have “people stand up for what they believe in or be present at the table. Not only for them to be educated themselves but for
them to voice their concerns or their opinions.” School Board President said, “We always had good, honest discussions about how people felt and, you know, where they wanted to see the future of our school.”

Experiences: Gradual decline of interest.

Table 4.11 Participant quotations on retrospective and the future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent Brown</td>
<td>I think they’ve melded together pretty well. Um, I think the communities to an extent maintained their own cultures, which is a good thing. Our communities have always been supportive of the school and I think they continue to be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Member Jones</td>
<td>Utilizing all the dollars that the state would permit us to use and then when we got to the merger part we had three more years of state dollars to support the merger. [Superintendent Brown] was very strategic in our timing, we want to use this, we want to get all these things in place, we want to have everything in order. And, that’s what you wanted was the understanding, the appreciation, the respect that makes it our district, and we are proud of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Member Smith</td>
<td>School was our social life. If we went to a community event, I could identify every student there. Once our family members were done with a school activity, my social life changed. Life evolves. The connection to school was affected as much by changing family activities as much or even more than by school consolidation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Wilson</td>
<td>I think the sports and then the fine arts side of it band and the chorus and the drama, I think, once they did that stuff they were, it was like nope we’re all in this together. Now we can have, you know, a better team for this or a better choir, because we are all together. I think that helped and then I think they realized that they’re just all the same people, we’re all the same people. They got in there and realized oh these are nice people. It’s not like they’re some, it’s not, you know, some evil person from a different part of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student Davis</td>
<td>Sometimes what you think is important at the moment changes. You outgrow the school and the area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board President Adams</td>
<td>The minute the word got out that we were thinking of consolidating our schools, we filled a gym basically of people with concerns. The, you know, we had all that concern in the beginning and then once we got to the end of the full consolidation everyone was good, good with it. I guess they trust that we, you know, we made the right decision as a Board. Um, you know, financially we were stable. Kids and happy, they’re succeeding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This section describes how participants are consistently and increasingly dependent on each other for fulfillment of plans and goals as the work continues. The sub-section “gone in the blink of an eye—finding right speed for change” discusses the need to move forward even though not all stakeholders were ready to make the move. The sub-section “keeping your nose
“to the grindstone—the work continues” portrays the balance between anticipation and retrospect and how the threat to well-being became the opportunity to enhance well-being. As Superintendent Brown said, “I don’t want to paint like everybody’s kumbaya and everything, because now we have regular problems that all school district do.” All participants mentioned the need to create a positive environment for all students to thrive in. There was also mention of ongoing issues. As Superintendent Brown said, “People are unhappy about this or that or other things. We’ve lost a few more open enrollment out because of the distances to some of the buildings.” Superintendent Brown shared surveys of the open enrollments out were conducted, but “they are not very useful. Typically, most times, if somebody brings in a form we just ask them. You know, have a conversation.”

Alumni Student Wilson said it was difficult to recall someone “who was negative toward the situation, um, I don’t have one person.” It was shared:

Right away it felt like it was the students before the vote. It felt like it was the students that were like I don’t want to do this, I don’t think we need this. After the vote they started to combine the students with each other. They did activities and combined people just to try and ease that transition. So that kind of helped get the students as supporters of it, but that didn’t help the community side of it. I think you still had the community that was pushing back on it until they realized that it was a good situation for everybody. So, it’s was kind of a slow process. There’s obviously people you’ll never get on board with it. I think for the most part it did transition over to the outside people, the people who aren’t really involved and then eventually they’ll kind of come around or did come around. But it was a slow process that’s for sure.
Superintendent Brown recalled a nay-sayer. It was shared there was a “save our school website that popped up from a [East Community School District] patron. They were not happy with, you know, they didn’t want to lose their little school.” Superintendent Brown described this as “disheartening” but that it “didn’t gain any steam which was, which was good. You know, that could’ve been a huge detriment to the election, but, um it, it popped up and kind of disappeared as fast, just as fast.” Superintendent Brown said, for the most part:

I chose to ignore it. At one meeting the Board mentioned it. I said we’ll just see how, where it goes. If they have questions or something we’ll talk. And, I had some email conversations with the person. It was his opinion and he was trying to identify all the others that had the same opinion and there just weren’t very many of them.

School Board President Adams shared that there was not a “ton of information out there and so I think we were trying to be creative yet go by the rules and the policies of the state.” The school board tried to follow what was needed but also there was room for “doing research on the side, you know, just to gain knowledge on how to handle a very sensitive issue.”

School Board President Adams also shared that “the year went so fast.” As School Board President Adams said, “I tried to ask people how they felt about it and just continue to be myself and just keep that open door and positive attitude about it.”

Gone in the blink of an eye—finding right speed for change.

This was significant since there was a general feeling that recommendations and decisions needed to be made and the discussion phase could only linger for so long. That knowledge kept the discussions more focused and committee members felt an urgency to gather information and present the information at the committee meetings in a more succinct manner. Superintendent Brown did share that “we got questions from wait a minute why is this going so
fast, why do we have to make these decisions now, and can we wait and because of the statutory timeline we couldn’t.” Superintendent Brown continued this thought when it was said, “I think there’s other people, that it takes longer than five years to get something put together, because they, they take all this time and then they talk things out longer. Overall a longer way and it might end up with better decisions but it also sometimes also ends up with more, uh, disagreements.”

Superintendent Brown made many remarks about the need to understand the process and then communicate that to the public in a short amount of time which, it was felt by Superintendent Brown, was not a typical timeframe for most school districts pursuing whole grade sharing and consolidation. Superintendent Brown said it consistently needed to be the committees getting information out to people. School Board President Adams shared that naysayers grew less by the month and “the more research we did and the more, I think, people felt like we had to go through all this to come to the decision we came to.”

*Keeping your nose to the grindstone—the work continues.*

School Board President Adams said there was a consistent thought of “just wanting what was best for the students and for my own kids.” School Board President also shared that the general environment during the process was positive. It was said:

> Once we moved to the full consolidation, I felt like it was positive because we had those years as a joint school and most people saw the benefits, saw what their kids were doing. You know, the majority of the parents that are very involved in the school saw how their kids, you know, their academics were going well, um, they were happy, involved.

School Board President Adams shared that it was likely not all stakeholders were positive about the changes in the school. It was said:
I’m sure people out there that are still have a little crutch against [Unity Community School District] as a school. But I guess they’ve just kind of gotten used to it. You know, it is the way it is. We’re not going backwards. We said if we go backwards, you know, it’s going to be hard. It’s going to be very, very hard.”

Superintendent Brown said in a five-year community needs assessment conducted in year two of the whole grade sharing, “84 percent felt very positive about it. They supported the organization.” Superintendent Brown further gave evidence to this feeling of support from stakeholders:

When we had our election [vote on school consolidation after five years of whole grade sharing], it was 95 percent. Positive votes. That’s huge. I mean [a neighboring school district], they do well too. They were between 70 and 80 for the most part, but 95 is big. Community Member Jones shared that it had been anticipated there would be a very high acceptance rate because of the quality of the process through the whole grade sharing that had already taken place. Credit was given by Community Member Jones to the consistent positive feedback from the students for achieving the high acceptance rate.

Superintendent Brown stated whole grade sharing was not the only way for schools to reorganize and there are “four or five ways that schools can work with each other or share something.” Whole grade sharing is “a good solution and it worked in our situation. Um, but there are other ways that they can do things and there’s never one thing that works just right for everybody.” Superintendent Brown was “pretty confident in it all the way.” It was shared:

I know we had questioning and sometimes it felt like I was playing referee between both sides. But, it wasn’t anything we couldn’t handle and we knew it was going to be an issue to some folks and we explained it to them and said well this is how it’s going to be.
And, I think the academics for the kids and the programs for the kids trump all the negativity.

Community Member Jones said the whole grade sharing and consolidation plans were a sign of the current times in education in rural areas:

You are looking at county schools instead of individual school districts and yes this is going to be the norm unless you are near a metropolitan area and you’re a suburb and you’re growing then you’re fine. But, if you are rural this is what is going to be the norm. I remember traveling in North Dakota and that’s what they were doing way back when I was there. In Montana, you were basically a county school and everybody had to drive.

Community Member Jones also commented on the need for leadership to keep making improvements and keep current with educational initiatives. Even though the work involved in the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process had demanded considerable time, there were other projects that also moved forward during this period of time. Community Member Jones said:

This group of leaders took on two other projects along with this consolidation and that was building a new gymnasium and building the safe room at the elementary. And I think that was wise to go on to the next project immediately and say OK we have gotten to this point now let’s improve things even more and get these two projects done. The district looked at, and I was on the facilities committee when the new gym was designed, that having an outside entrance to the building, and you could lock off the rest of the building. So they have this designated space to rent. So it’s income for the district as well as additional practice space; the golf team then has a place to hit during the winter,
softball, baseball had a space to hit if they wanted during the winter. It just created additional opportunities and a feeling that you could have the JV game at one location and the varsity in another. You could get them done closer to the same time or if there was bad weather you could move it up and have multiple things going on. The girl scouts, the boy scouts the 4-H clubs, city recreation, whatever could come in and utilize the space, have some rent money coming in. I just think that it was a wise move to keep moving, keep showing activities versus we got to this point, we’re done. If there isn’t movement, people are thinking there is something wrong or that it is stalling. And, that is the last thing that a school district wants is to stall.

Superintendent Brown shared there was a need to work on relationships, especially among the faculty and staff. It was shared “we still have people who, we’ve got less than 100 teachers and they still don’t know each other’s names.” It was noted that:

when we get, when we’ve been together, and we work together, we put them in groups and every once in a while, somebody will go, I don’t know if I’ve ever seen that person before. How’s that? It’s like really (laughter). So, you need to put a little more focus on that since they tend to stay in their own social circles. They don’t mesh and so, we had to force them to. I think we should have them just get together and just talk about things you do when you are standing around in a party somewhere. Just letting them get to know each other. And find their differences and similarities. You know how that just triggers more and more conversation and more, better relationships.

Summary of findings: Research Question Two.

There was ongoing activity to “perform the conversation” which involved formal and informal conversations with various stakeholders to draw them into the process. Leadership used a set of practices to create the context for the conversation: building networks of relevant parties,
bringing the right people together for predetermined tasks, and continuing to facilitate the entire process. Cognition was in the path of action. Action preceded cognition and focused the cognition. Actions were important because they created more raw ingredients and generated stimuli or cues so people could learn more about a situation by taking action and paying attention to the cues generated by that action. When actions were used deliberately, they tested the provisional understanding generated through long-held beliefs and values. Action and cognition were recursively linked: action served as fodder to establish new meaning while simultaneously providing feedback about the thinking that had already been known. Actions shaped the environment since the same actions that helped people make sense of what was happening also altered what people encountered and, consequently, changed the very situation that prompted the thinking in the first place.

Summary of Chapter Four

One of the initial goals for whole grade sharing and school consolidation is often improved fiscal conditions and opportunities for students, as it was for the West Community School District and the East Community School District, but the conversations concerning school consolidation quickly turned among the stakeholders to the less quantitative issues and the symbols, traditions, and memories become a focus for the community. School consolidation had an effect on the vitality and well-being of the people of the rural community and the relationships among the members of the rural community. The emotional bonds to the school as well as cognitive aspects such as memories, knowledge, understanding, and meaning were points of conversation that began early in the change process and a range of emotions started to emerge and linger.

Furthermore, there were collective behaviors that encouraged members of the rural community to protect, preserve, and defend the local school including the built and natural
environment of the school. There were complex place and social cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, in response to environmental disruptions or threats, that led to individual and collective actions, adaptations, and acceptance or rejection of the disruption. The perceived loss of what was known and what had happened were the issues and not the change itself. In the study, consistent communication over time and respect for the rural community traditions and culture helped with acceptance of change. The participants in this study did not fear or deny that change occurred but expressed the need to take time to consider symbols and traditions of the past to help individuals adapt to the change.

Findings were framed by the researcher’s theoretical perspective of rural and the conclusions are limited to the rural population meeting the applied definition of rural. The results may not be the same in urban, suburban or even other rural schools if a different definition of rural is applied. The study depicted the associations between involvement and various contextual influences at a particular time. Furthermore, the study looked at the ways in which people reacted to and interacted with individual, relational, and environmental contexts to produce particular outcomes.

The use of Bronfenbrenner’s theory framed the larger picture and helped acknowledge that interactions between factors in the individual’s maturing biology, immediate environment and the societal landscape influenced his or her development. The belief system, bodies of knowledge, values, way of life, and material resources are common or at least have some similarities (Patil, 2018). It was evident individuals and their environments constantly affected one another; everything was interrelated and interacted with each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Furthermore, the bioecological theory provided an opportunity to better capture and explain the numerous environmental factors and the person as intertwining
relationships, roles and processes were realized over the multiple years of the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process.

The emphasis of the theory on the environment in which individuals operate was important because it was apparent through the comments of the participants interviewed that development was shaped by the individual’s singular and collective interactions with the specific, rural environment. These developments needed to be considered at the individual as well as the cultural level. It was evident that, as Bronfenbrenner contended, individuals and groups of people initially pay close attention to the activity of the other and each begin to acknowledge the activity of the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1988). The responses of the six participants were evidence there were variations in motivation, persistence and temperament. These variations provided an opportunity to capture and explain how the numerous environmental factors influenced personal characteristics and also presented how personal characteristics changed environments. Individuals came to understand their world and formulated ideas about their place within it as the fairly regular reciprocal interaction continued over extended periods of time within the external environment. As such, I was able to probe deeper in the data analysis and have a better understanding of the issues within the study.

The dynamic interactions among the members of the rural community expressed the sociological essence of communal vitality or the moral resources of the community which included trust, social norms, and social obligations. The social networks of an individual’s activity, including voluntary associations, had a strong impact on an individual’s perception of a situation or issue. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner found that it is possible for individuals who find themselves within the same ecological system to still experience very different environments (Psychology Notes, 2013). The individual may not be directly involved but the
context may have important indirect influences on the individual’s development and affect and encompass an individual’s thinking and life. It was evident the “resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 25) had an effect on changing expectations and events in the larger society.

Time in Bronfenbrenner’s model is a consideration for what has already happened, what is happening, and the potential for change in the future. This encompasses the influence of both change and constancy on the person’s environment over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1988). In this study, it was evident that rural schools have evolved over the years and it is likely changes will continue to happen in the future.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

This study began with the end in mind and I started drafting the outline of the final report before the case study had begun, as Yin (1994) suggested. I was mindful of the iterative process of case study throughout the study and the goal was to arrive at a discovery by repeating rounds of analysis. The purpose of the study was to examine the role of identity during the consideration of rural school consolidation and to explore the affective, behavioral and social factors that are involved within the consideration of consolidation of a rural Midwestern school district.

Research has indicated that rural means strong ties exist among members within a community and, furthermore, ties exist with wider networks such as neighboring communities. These ties help provide sufficiency of resources and prevent isolation. There are widely shared values and objectives pertaining to the rural community based on reciprocity and civic engagement (Koziol, et al, 2015). Within the rural environment, there is “rootedness” of the individuals and intense emotional reactions as events happen. Individuals interact within a social, cultural, and physical space. This sense of belonging is grounded within the social identity approach that proposes a person derives a sense of self through the groups in which he or she is connected. This social identity grows from the school identity, the feeling of being connected and belonging to a school.

The connections people had with the school mascot, the school colors, the school building, the facilities surrounding the school building such as the athletic complex, and the activities of a particular school group and/or a specific time in the history of the school created a social identity for people. When the stakeholders of a school district had a strong social identity,
they were more likely to view their school’s norms and values as being self-relevant and, therefore, have an increased sense of belonging. Furthermore, they were more likely to want to live up to the aspirations of the school (Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1978).

Schools and communities are complex systems, involving a network of overlapping and sometimes competing relationships that are affected by larger contextual factors. The various locales involved in the study are no longer isolated from each other. They are linked together in complex ways that influenced the operation and outcome of processes taking place within each setting. This linkage appears to be the result of a combination of conscious, coordinated effort as well as ad hoc innovations and processes which proceeded in complementary and convergent directions. The individuals and groups moved from individual thinking to joint activity, which was the beginning of an emotional bond that strengthened and grew over time. Relationships evolved and changed and the development of an individual within a context was noted throughout the study.

**Discussion**

Three common aspects were paramount. These aspects were: a sense of pride was consistently present and drove people to action, a person’s identity was affected by a wide-ranging number of factors and the individuals had different views on what issues should be prioritized, and community involvement and support for the school was important so, therefore, it was essential for the school to work with rather than against the identity of the individuals and the environment.

First, people were proud of their personal accomplishments and their role in the rural community. This personal pride extended to a feeling of pride in their school and their community. There was pride in individual accomplishments, pride in the traditions and
infrastructure, pride in the role of the individual within the community, and pride in the ability to achieve sustainability for the future.

This sense of pride was primarily manifested in the attachment and satisfaction presented by the traditions and symbols attributed to the school. Meanings and attachment were formed through experience with the school and community and people had the ability to create their own significant symbols on the basis of experiences of their own choosing. Social identity and the pride in that social identity was, in part, rooted within and grew from the school identity. The linkages between people and their environment were not an end in themselves, but, rather, a predisposing action. People were willing to fight for those things that were more central to their identities and that were perceived as being in less-than-optimal condition. This was especially true when important symbolic meanings and artifacts which had personal significance and contributed to social identity were threatened by prospective change. To neglect place-protective behaviors—and the factors that predict them—would have presented huge barriers to progress.

The recognition of and attendance to the place-protective behaviors played an important role in how the stakeholders went about dealing with the challenges imposed by the process of whole grade sharing and school consolidation. Alkire (2005) stated that these complex patterns of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, and traditions that have built up over time are often overlooked in educational settings. If the pride in the school culture, including the culture of the individual schools considering school consolidation as well as the planned culture of the newly-formed school district, would have been ignored, the ability for people to continue to work together, solve problems together, and confront challenges together would have been limited.

I would suggest that these place-protective behaviors can be addressed through advocacy leadership. Advocacy leadership, a form of social justice leadership, addresses issues of pride
and politics as well as being mindful of the moral component of leadership (Anderson, 2009). The advocacy leader is charged with promoting change at the school district (system) level in order to work through the underlying behaviors within the system and society. In addition, the leader responsibilities and relationships are expanded beyond the school to include all stakeholders in recognition of the complexity of change and of leadership in schools (Anderson, 2009).

In this study, there were consistent elements of advocacy leadership, which is sometimes called authentic leadership, used to assuage issues around whole grade sharing and consolidation and, subsequently, build the trust and community needed to make progress. The social identity connected to the traditions, symbols, and facilities of the school was methodically reviewed and addressed by leaders. Stakeholder opinion and feedback were sought and genuinely considered. The stakeholders had a voice and had opportunity for active involvement in the decision-making process. The use of advocacy leadership included and was used by a variety of stakeholders rather than by being limited to people in prescribed leadership roles such as the superintendent and school board president.

The use of advocacy leadership helped stakeholders feel emboldened and empowered to transform attitudes and be part of the vision. Community members and other stakeholders involved with leaders who embodied the traits of advocacy leadership practices were more likely to extend this support to others and engage in crafting solutions that better served their individual, community and school’s interests. Advocacy was important at all levels.

As a way to foster advocacy leadership, opportunities for leadership training both at the national and local levels need to expand. Both individuals and institutions must make leadership development for superintendents and other current and emerging school leaders a priority (Mrig
& Sanaghan). The training programs need to include ways leaders can effectively respond to a challenge or crisis. Present and emerging leaders need to know how to build bridges from the past to the future, how to work with and through others, how to recognize and grow potential in others, and how to deliver sustainable results based on vision (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017). Through participation in the training programs, current and emerging leaders will gain the necessary skills to make the planning process transparent and inclusive which will build the necessary trust for the change process to move forward (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017).

Second, a person’s identity was affected by a wide-ranging number of factors and individuals had different views on what issues should be prioritized. There was not one single thing that made the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process work for the participants, but, rather, it was a host of things. The efforts to discover and acknowledge what had importance to the identity of the stakeholders made it possible for the stakeholders to feel included and valued as changes were occurring. Identity was not negated; it was discussed, respected, and considered. This communication and freedom to voice ideas and opinions was present throughout the change process.

Individuals could voice opinions on issues of importance to their perceived identity. Conscious, coordinated effort as well as ad hoc innovations and processes led to the individual adjustment of the lens to view the world. Also, it was important there was a visionary plan to guide the overall process especially since the plan was implemented over a relatively short amount of time. Furthermore, it was important the plan was flexible enough to adapt to challenges and opportunities. This flexibility and the responsiveness to stakeholder input allowed the plan to move forward with stakeholder support for the plan. It was known that
identity was changing but there was also opportunity for input in the change and each individual had the opportunity to be involved and have concerns addressed.

As stakeholders became involved in the change process, there was less anxiety and a growing desire to understand the situation and set the trajectory. This ability to be better-equipped to deal with change is supported by research done with institutions faced with mergers and acquisitions. Linde and Schalk (2006) found institutions face challenges during reorganization such as poor planning, unskilled execution, misalignment of cultures, and talent mismanagement. The type of reorganization that exists within whole grade sharing and school consolidation has “second order change” implications. A second order change takes place when most stakeholders view the change as a break with the past and in conflict with their existing perspectives and identity (Water & Cameron, 2005). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) described second order change as a deep transformational effort and one that requires transforming the way an entire school runs and meets the needs of the students. Second order change is not superficial. To embark on second order change, there must be the continuous analysis of the complexities that come with this type of alteration and the involvement of stakeholders to guide the process. The effect on the stakeholders must be acknowledged.

I would suggest that to accomplish effective change and to acknowledge the changing identity of the stakeholders while also being mindful of the mission of the school, there needs to be attention to the following factors: knowledge of curriculum, optimizer, change agent, monitoring and evaluating, flexibility, and ideals/beliefs. Second-order change is comprehensive and attention needs to be given to these responsibilities. For example, change agent and monitoring are important because they encourage collaboration and then implementation of a
diplomatic approach to change current school practices and traditions. Feedback on how practices are affecting stakeholders, especially the students, has value.

This study found that relating practices to the positive effect of the change for students and the positive reaction of the students was a way to encourage stakeholders to buy-in to the change. The stakeholders may not have liked the effect the change was making on an individual identity, the school identity or the community identity but the majority of stakeholders did recognize the positive response of students to the change. There was also knowledge that sustainability of opportunity for future students meant changes needed to happen. Supporting change with the emphasis on increased student opportunity subsided anxiety and helped most stakeholders put personal views aside and move forward. Opportunities for students included the ability to have greater disciplinary specialization, better articulation in expansion of the curriculum, increased collaboration, and better equipped classrooms. These types of opportunities for students that occur through school consolidation are supported through research (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005; Nitta et al., 2010).

Change was a difficult process for people to embrace. Leaders needed to dedicate time analyzing and fine-tuning their actions and exhibited the willingness to listen and gather information to overcome the unexpected. This encouraged trust and transparency since stakeholders were given access to, and encouraged to look at, the gathered information on an ongoing basis. The information was connected with the vision for the school and the plan was transparent. Stakeholders were continuously working on the process in the same direction and the stakeholders had the opportunity to see how each individual would fit into the bigger picture.

Third, a community WANTS a school but a school NEEDS a community. Community involvement and support for the school was important so, therefore, the school worked with
rather than against the identity of the individuals and the environment. Good communication, great involvement by a variety of people, sound leadership, and acknowledgment of concerns came up many times as solid examples of an ongoing reciprocal exchange among people. The community was where educators, families, businesses, and community members formed teams and developed partnerships to create the conditions for children to learn and thrive. Individual identities were recognized and then compromise and cohesion happened. These partnerships provided social services and supports and enriching educational opportunities with a strong emphasis on making greatest use of the community’s strengths, including the people within the community. Families and community residents were active participants in the school and helped plan and implement the events and activities that led to the continuation of identity. The contributions of the individuals and the community were valued. The focus was on groups of people connected by geography—instead of a focus on separate individuals. Communities banded together and were committed to the long haul. The collective action was highlighted rather than shunned and the desire to work together became greater than meeting individual needs.

**Research Question One: How does the school consolidation process impact various stakeholders’ self-perceived identity?**

Participants viewed the perceived success of the whole grade sharing and school consolidation efforts through their respective multiple roles that they played in the process. A sense of loss emerged depending on the role of the individual and how that individual was affected by others. It was evident that each participant saw and interacted with the world through many lenses and, therefore, each participant had a vested interest in the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process and each felt he or she had played a significant role in the perceived success of the process.
Research Question Two: How do the experiences in the school consolidation process impact the self-perceived identity of the stakeholders?

Communication was a critical component which led to stakeholders maintaining a sense of identity. This communication was consistent, methodical, informational, and responsive. This communication demonstrated the desire to acknowledge any concerns, but also maintained focus on the plan, the timeline, and the host of varied factors involved in the process. The responsiveness to the thoughts, opinions, and questions did not have to be in agreement with what was desired but the response did need to indicate that listening had occurred and acknowledge how the concern would be addressed. When there was a lack of communication and a perceived lack of a desire to listen to the opinions of others, there was the tendency for inaccurate information to be disseminated. This did not happen often but when it did happen, the prescribed and emergent leadership worked to remedy the situation. People were invested in having a successful outcome for stakeholders. The knowledge of the need for change to achieve sustainability for the students undermined some individual identity issues.

Summary of Discussion

This study provided information that whole grade sharing and school consolidation involve much more than financial numbers and school enrollment figures. Whole grade sharing and consolidation were dynamic and complex processes linking cognitive, affective, and behavioral components in response to disruption or threat which led to collective actions and adaptations. The processes seem to have led to acceptance for many stakeholders. Individuals had a need to have discussions on the school identity and explored the changing nature of the school identity and how it related to the bonding the individuals had to the school, to each other, and to the community.
The place interdependence and the sense of being part of the community were addressed as school consolidation was considered. The conversations and actions that resulted were sometimes contentious since there were efforts to protect or preserve identity and the quality of life that was part of that identity. In reality, the contentiousness that resulted was best resolved through peer-to-peer interaction as rational thought overtook the initial emotional reaction. The actions were constructive and cooperative and ultimately led to reconfiguration or revitalization of the school and the acceptance of a changed identity.

Furthermore, though school consolidation is sometimes considered and even implemented rather reflexively to remedy a district’s economic pressure and cost increases, this study showed there was value in addressing the more difficult emotional issues as people experienced the sense of loss of the world as they wanted it to be and had known it to be. The individuals of the rural community were able to accept and adapt to the change since the importance of the school as a symbol and hub for the whole community was considered and addressed as school consolidation was discussed. School administrators and school boards were wise to consider the changes in awareness, knowledge, or motivation, practices, social conditions and environment before it was posed as an option to local taxpayers and school staff. Consideration happened and decisions followed after input was sought and collaboration occurred. The efforts to gather input were time consuming and presented challenges but huge benefits were reaped in the outcome.

The efforts to involve others in the decision making process concentrated on acceptance and adaptation to maintain the quality of the physical and social environment and ultimately the wellbeing and culture of the larger community. A broader look at the role of the school within the community and attention to the disruption to the environment served as a catalyst for
development of the mobilization and individual participation in response to perceived threats to the identity and culture. The quality of the physical and social environment needed to be proactively addressed and not dismissed. Collective action led to continued positive social identity and the continuation of cherished memories, symbols and places. Elements of social cognitions, emotional bonds, and the resulting actions were sufficient and positively addressed, and the response was greater acceptance of the consolidated school district.

**Implications**

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of identity during the consideration of rural school consolidation and to explore the affective, behavioral, and social factors that are involved within the consideration of consolidation of a rural Midwestern school district. The implication of this dissertation research regarding the study of identity in a rural environment during the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process was two-fold.

First, this study added to a thin line of research on the role of identity in a rural environment within the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process. The importance of involvement of various stakeholders as decisions were being made and the vital role of ongoing different types of communication were emphasized by the participants. The creation of committees and the establishment of lines of communication early in the process in order to circulate accurate information and gather feedback were signs of responsiveness to stakeholder concerns. Concerns over loss of identity, potential barriers, and trust issues were addressed.

Second, the study also developed the line of research related to the knowledge and understanding of the rural environment as the process was happening and decisions were being made. Rural people are conditioned to use retrospect to get a sense of direction. They are resilient, strive for credibility, make do, and keep showing up even when they feel defeated or harmed. The frequency of communication and meetings led to better understanding and
provided an opportunity for discourse. These were micro-level actions—small actions—but they were small actions with significant consequences. These skills and properties warrant attention since they had a role in shaping cognition through forming the physical landscape, through interpretation of the landscape, and in favoring certain experiences over others. The source of the cognition for the people that developed the pride factor needs further examining.

**Implications for Future Practice**

Research specifically examining the role of identity in initiating and implementing school consolidation is incomplete and has often focused on the more quantitative factors such as fiscal matters and curriculum offerings. The presence of an investigation on the role of identity in a rural environment during school consolidation efforts has been limited. However, the relevant literature has also indicated that the role of social and school identity, the impact on an individual’s self-perceived identity, and the connection that results between school and community in the school consolidation process are significant factors in an individual and community’s response to the process of school consolidation.

Therefore, the field should encourage school districts considering consolidation to examine the shared values and connections of an individual, a school, and a community prior to implementation of a change. There is a need for transparent conversations and information-gathering on the complex systems that overlap and sometimes compete. Throughout this investigation, the field should encourage school districts to remain solid to and communicate the mission and vision of the school. Staff, students, parents, and community need to see, hear, and repeat the mission and vision. Furthermore, the field should encourage leaders in the consolidation process to devote time and effort into establishing the culture of the new district and supporting it until it is clearly imbedded into the “soul” of the newly formed district. Failure
to maintain the newly established culture may allow the strong but less favorable voices to re-emerge.

This study addressed the identity and experiences of six participants who served in varied roles during the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process. By examining perceptions of these six participants in the context of whole grade sharing and school consolidation in a rural environment, this study contributed to the thin body of research on role of identity. Exploration of the cognitive aspects such as memories, knowledge, understanding, and meaning aided in understanding how individuals confront and gain some satisfaction with school consolidation issues, both as individuals and as members of the school and rural community.

The research has demonstrated that once held, meanings are crucial determinants of attachment and behavior. The findings of this study suggested clear communication and building trust as well as maintaining relationships with students, staff, parents, and community members needed to be an ongoing activity. Attachment to the school was predicted by people’s involvement in school organizations, activities and volunteering which led to taking more of an interest in the school and wanting to spend time with other attached people.

Since people who are more attached are more likely to come together to defend their areas from outside threats, to engage in more responsible behavior, and to be socially involved (Junot, Paquet, & Fenouillet), steps should be taken to increase and then maintain the school attachment. The branding efforts-mascots, colors, name, signage, uniforms-were useful as a way to establish cohesiveness. There also needed to be physical spaces for people to gather, and opportunities provided for people to become involved through clubs and organizations.
The opportunities, challenges and influences found in this study were in the context of a shift from separation to cohesiveness required by whole grade sharing and school consolidation. The findings of this study suggested this is especially needed in the area of staffing of extra-curricular leadership roles and responsibilities. School leadership needed to reflect on their values for involving others in the staffing process and stretch their ability to engage others, including community members as well as those directly impacted by the decisions. The ability of the school leaders to be adaptive and responsive influenced the success of the whole grade sharing and school consolidation in the long-term.

**Implications for Future Research**

Through the data collection and analysis process, the thoughts and actions provided by the participants revealed the process of organizational learning when faced with events that disrupt the normal functioning of lives within the rural environment. It was clear from the connections among affective, behavioral, and cognitive components that this study had implications related to research.

The findings of this study contributed to the relevant research on the understanding of the role of identity within whole grade sharing and school consolidation in a rural environment. Additionally, this study opened lines of research specific to other issues concerned with the whole grade sharing and school consolidation process. As school districts continue to change and state and federal mandates change, it is recommended to trace the effects of policies and programs on the meso-structures and the micro-structures of the consolidated school district. Policies and programs can be analyzed as ends in themselves.

Demographic, physical, and social factors were all part of the individual identity structure and provided the feelings of distinctiveness, continuity, self-efficacy and self-esteem. There seemed to be a relationship between attachment to the school and length of residence. It is
unknown whether this was based on the idea that the longer people reside in an area the more attached they become, or that people who are attached are more likely to stay in an area. In my findings, both are probably true. If a place meets a person’s needs, that person will develop a dependence on the place. This dependence will likely make the person more likely to remain in the area, and the longer the person resides there, the greater chance for the place to become part of the person’s identity which will increase the desire to continue to reside there. The correlation between length of residence and connection to a place needs further research.

Furthermore, it is known there is a strong connection to the school in a rural environment but it is also known the future of the school is jeopardized in the rural environment due to a declining rural population and economic stress. In the interviews with the six participants, I saw that the concerns they shared, the points of tension and the points of comfort were issues that are common in rural communities. The changing and uncertain farm economy as well as the trend toward absentee landowners of farmland means youth are more likely to find economic possibilities elsewhere. This results in fewer families in the rural areas and, therefore, fewer students in the school. While some in the community grapple with the ways to reengage the economy at large, the reality is that the rural schools face marginalization of one kind or another. Localized economic development and educational activity are ways to breathe new life into communities. Alumni Student Wilson proposed that “the whole thing [shape and size and square miles covered of a school district] should just be blown up and restructured but that would be a mess that can’t happen.” Alumni Student Wilson continued this thought by saying, “It’s [school consolidation effort] going to be a mess at times. In my mind, I think that, not that I wish them failure or anything, but I think it [school consolidation] probably is inevitable.”
The challenge of transportation in the rural environment will need to be addressed. There is a need to explore the logistics of transportation issues in combination with the structuring and scheduling of a rural school as well as explore the needs of students and their families in the rural setting. School districts have grown in size when measured by square mile and the transportation issue was a consistent issue mentioned by the participants. It seems to be an issue without simple resolution. School Board President Adams noted there were many conversations about travel time and how the school district could “get around some of the rules or the policies.” The implication for research is to find innovative ways for the rural school to continue to exist and efficiently function, including transportation, with the focus on a sustainable future for students and families.

These recommendations are based on the key findings that participants had a strong commitment to participatory democracy and local community bonds were important. Complex interactions existed and the perceived feeling by stakeholders of being slighted or less favored had intensified the rural environment issues. By seeking ways of responding to local traditions, values, and beliefs rather than by opposing or denigrating local cultural norms, positive change may be more possible.

**Reflections and Conclusions**

This study developed out of a long-standing (dating back to the 1980’s) interest I have had following my own involvement in the school consolidation process. I have pondered the question of why do some rural school consolidation processes happen seemingly so smoothly and why do others seem so contentious. In addition, as a member of a rural community, I am interested in the factors that are critical to members of a rural community as changes in the school are considered.
I found the role of identity in school consolidation to be a subject of interest in the conversations I prompted on this topic with family, friends, and acquaintances, especially those individuals who consider themselves members of a rural community. Personal opinions and stories were frequently shared and emotions emerged quickly within those conversations. Although this study will not allow me to share these informal conversations, I was motivated by the interest of others in the topic and the keen recall of memories by the individuals of past school consolidations. Furthermore, after having discussions on this topic in a number of my graduate classes, my cohorts and faculty members encouraged me to pursue this study and supported me in pursuing this topic for my dissertation.

In 2013, I was encouraged to consider pursuing my doctorate. After having worked in the public school system for 32 years, I was making a professional move to higher education and it was desirable to have a terminal degree. The confidence others had in me awakened a desire to go back to school and I began the Educational Leadership program at ISU in 2013.

I was interested in many topics, with most of the topics concerning issues I had experienced in my work within the public school. The topic that kept resurfacing was the dilemma schools faced as enrollment dropped and sustainability of services and facilities was jeopardized. As I would leave doctoral classes and complete assignments, I found myself going online and to the library at my own higher education institution researching the topic of school consolidation and the connection with the rural community. There was an abundance of research on the financial aspects of whole grade sharing school consolidation and other factors concerned with whole grade sharing and school consolidation, but there was a paucity of information on why school consolidation may be better received in the rural community and how this can happen.
Following the in-depth interviews with the six study participants, as well as the data analysis of the typed transcripts and the document review, I am convinced that doing qualitative research to understand the best way to approach the process of whole grade sharing and school consolidation is both important and timely. It is especially important as one looks at the increasing population shift in rural America and the number of school districts that are under financial distress. The study participants in this dissertation study offered great insights and those insights will help school administrators understand the importance and impact of whole grade sharing and school consolidation on the rural community and how to better address the more qualitative issues involved in whole grade sharing and school consolidation. It is important to take a deep and abiding interest in the well-being and concerns of all stakeholders affected by whole grade sharing and school consolidation. It is especially important to consider present and future students since they ultimately are the ones most affected by the change and they have an influential viewpoint.

Now that my research has been conducted, I am convinced that additional research is required in this area. I view the engagement of the school with the community and the community with the school as being central to a school’s future health. If the people of the rural community are disengaged with the school, the long-term viability of the school could be severely damaged. Working with and responding to the needs of the community should be a priority and will undoubtedly lead to an increased body of loyal community members, engaged volunteers, generous donors, ready-to-act advocates, and overall supporters.

I am also convinced that if respected leadership exists when whole grade sharing and school consolidation are considered, the change will be more likely accepted by the stakeholders. If the respected leadership involves students in the decision-making process and communication
cycle, there will likely be huge rewards. The students are advocates for the change and are invested in making the change have a successful outcome.

One thing this study made clear was that emotion trumps fact. The facts need to be gathered and disseminated, but there also needs to be a consistent recognition of the emotion felt by the stakeholders. Leaders should not get consumed by this emotion but the awareness of the thoughts and feelings of various stakeholders helps develop the respect and trust that is needed for collaboration and progress.

Embarking on this research project was a great learning experience. It was enlightening for me to satisfy my thirst for knowledge about rural communities and the role of the school in the rural community. That thirst for knowledge continues and I now have other topics I would like to explore. There are five studies borne out of ideas generated through this research project: 1) success for student beyond high school and whether the larger high school setting encourages a greater percentage of students to pursue post-secondary enrollment versus the smaller school setting; 2) reduction of ongoing costs for a rural school district and what and how much can be cut before the success of students is negatively affected; 3) restructuring of the school day/week/year to increase efficiency and positively affect student learning; 4) whether whole grade sharing and school consolidation increase efficiency in school operations; and 5) the job satisfaction of teachers who have experienced whole grade sharing and school consolidation.
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Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2017). *Whole grade sharing.* Retrieved from https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/118/50?view=section


APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview I: Context of participants’ experience and life history. Reconstruct details of their experiences.

What is your age and educational background?
When did you graduate from high school?
Where did you grow up?
How long have you lived in the Midwest?
How long have you lived in a rural community?
How long did or have you lived in the school district?
Did other members of your family go to this school? If yes, were they graduates of the school and when did they attend/graduate?
What connections do you have with the school district (i.e., children who are/have been students, employee, involved in activities, family members who are employees, live in school district and own property and/or business, volunteer worker at activities)
What is your current occupation?
What has been your occupation over the last 10 years?
What is your involvement with the school’s consolidation process?
What is your specific role(s) in the school consolidation process?
What, if anything, did you do to prepare yourself for the consolidation process?
How do you define rural?
How did the definition of rural play a role in school consolidation?
How would you describe yourself (personally) during the school consolidation process?
What types of personal changes do you think you have undergone during the process?
What types of social changes have you undergone during the process?
What types of academic changes have you undergone during the process?
What kind of support have you had as you experienced the process?
What kind of support have you offered to others as you experienced the process?
How would you describe the resources that have been available to you during the process?
What types of strategies did you use to make the process manageable?
What have been the easiest parts of the process?
What types of things surprised you about the process?
What have been some of the bigger challenges or obstacles you have had to overcome?
How would you describe the school district’s culture?
Has the school district’s culture changed over the last five years?
How would you compare the school district’s culture with the community’s culture?
What was the general environment like during the process of consolidation?
What are your top three favorite memories of the process?
What are your top three worst memories of the process?
How was the symbolic identity (autonomy, vitality, integration, and traditions of the community) of the school addressed as consolidation was considered?
What caused local stakeholders to resist or support consolidation?
What factors influenced stakeholders to consider change and, perhaps, consider school consolidation?
How do you alter people’s ideologies and fundamental beliefs about how the world works?
How does knowledge of local culture play a role in reform? What needs to be known about local traditions, values, and beliefs?
What questions do you have of me?

**Interview II: Participants reflect on meaning of their experience**

Was the right decision made about school consolidation? Why or why not?
If you feel the right decision was made, when did you know the right decision had been made about school consolidation?
If you had to do it all over again, what types of things would you do differently?
If you had to do it all over again, what would you do similarly?
What advice would you give to others considering school consolidation?
Is there anything you would like to discuss that we have not already talked about regarding your experiences or your decisions in the school consolidation process?
If you had to summarize your overall experience with school consolidation from the time the process began until today in just a few words, what would you say?

Exit question:
1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
APPENDIX B. BACKGROUND NOTES AND FIELD NOTES

Background Notes Protocol / Field Notes

Date:       Time Interview Began:                     Time Ended:
Participants (interviewee and interviewer):

At the very beginning of the interview, describe the setting. Be sure to note any changes in setting as the interview proceeds. Also note how the session begins. Describe how the session begins. What exactly was said at the beginning?

(1) What is the setting? What are the boundaries of this site? How did I gain access to the site? What are the structural and organizational features of the workplace – what do the building and environment look like and how they were used (i.e. meeting place description: detail and description, size and accessibility, general atmosphere, color, size, shape, number of desks/tables, number of windows, furniture or equipment in the space room, temperature, noise level)

(2) Interviewee as he/she interacted with interviewer– how did he/she behave, interact, dress, move (nonverbal communication displayed). How much do they fidget, move around? How does interviewee physically place self in the setting?)

(3) The daily process of activities – general atmosphere.

(4) Any special events that occurred such as interruptions to the interview such as phone calls, interactions with others

(5) Dialogue. What was the pace of the conversation? Was eye contact made? What was tone of voice used? Are there any changes in interaction during the observations?

(6) An everyday diary of events as they occurred both in the field and before entering the field

(7) A personal and reflective diary which includes the researcher’s thoughts about going into the field and being there, and reflections on the researcher’s life experiences that might influence the way in which the researcher filters what is observed. Who am I in relation to this site? What do I already know about the place? In what ways am I familiar with the site?

How does the interview end? (What are the signals that the interview is ending? How do participants react)

Seating diagram (described by “X” to note seat occupied by interviewee, “F” designates interviewer):
APPENDIX C. AUDIT TRAIL

- February 19, 2019 – Received approval to conduct the study from the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board.

- February 22-April 17, 2019 – Conducted 12 interviews (two interviews with each of the six participants).

- May 3, 2019 – Sent interview transcripts to all participants for their review.

- May 31, 2019 – Received all interview transcripts back from participants with their comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Email contact and cell phone contact to arrange interviews. Inclement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>weather caused reschedule of interview one and interview two. Scheduled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>time/date for second interview at end of first interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board</td>
<td>Email contact and cell phone contact to arrange interviews. Scheduled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>time/date for second interview at end of first interview but then had</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams</td>
<td>to reschedule interview two due to conflict with a school activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Member</td>
<td>Email and face-to-face contact to arrange interviews. Scheduled time/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>date for second interview at end of first interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Member</td>
<td>Email and face-to-face contact to arrange interviews. Scheduled time/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>date for second interview at end of first interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>Email and cell phone contact to arrange interviews. Scheduled time/date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>Email and cell phone contact to arrange interviews. Scheduled time/date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>for second interview at end of first interview.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515 294-4566

Date: 02/19/2019
To: Sue Burrack
     Constance Beecher, PhD
From: Office for Responsible Research
Title: School Consolidation: A Qualitative Case Study on the Role of School Identity
IRB ID: 19-055
Submission Type: Initial Submission
Review Type: Expedited
Approval Date: 02/18/2019

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- **Retain signed informed consent documents** for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.

- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study or study materials.

- **Promptly inform the IRB of any addition of or change in federal funding for this study.** Approval of the protocol referenced above applies only to funding sources that are specifically identified in the corresponding IRB application.

- **Inform the IRB if the Principal Investigator and/or Supervising Investigator end their role or involvement with the project with sufficient time to allow an alternate PI/Supervising Investigator to assume oversight responsibility.** Projects must have an eligible PI to remain open.
• Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

• IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

• Your research study may be subject to post-approval monitoring by Iowa State University’s Office for Responsible Research. In some cases, it may also be subject to formal audit or inspection by federal agencies and study sponsors.

• Upon completion of the project, transfer of IRB oversight to another IRB, or departure of the PI and/or Supervising Investigator, please initiate a Project Closure to officially close the project. For information on instances when a study may be closed, please refer to the IRB Study Closure Policy.

If your study requires continuing review, indicated by a specific Approval Expiration Date above, you should:

• Stop all human subjects research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Human subjects research activity can resume once IRB approval is re-established.

• Submit an application for Continuing Review at least three to four weeks prior to the Approval Expiration Date as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX E. INFORMED CONSENT

Investigator: Sue Burrack

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate. This research has been approved by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board.

Introduction
The purpose of the study is to provide school districts considering reorganization or consolidation with a framework to help in addressing the issue of school identity in the process. School identity is the personalization of the learning environment and the sense of belonging and connection people have with a school. The study will explore the affective and social factors that are involved within the consideration of consolidation of a rural Midwestern school district.

What role does school identity play in school consolidation consideration? What are the questions and concerns about school identity posed by various stakeholders from the perspective of the Superintendent, President of the School Board, alumni students and selected members of the community? How are questions and concerns about school identity addressed by these various stakeholders? What are the biggest concerns and how were they addressed?

Participants of this study include:
1. one Superintendent
2. one School Board President or Member
3. two community members
4. two alumni students

You are eligible to take part in this study if you fit into one of the categories listed above AND you:
5. Graduated from high school.
6. Lived in the Midwest for a majority of your life.
7. Lived within the school districts studied for a minimum of five years, and
8. Are a long-time resident of geographic areas considered rural.

* NOTE: Participating alumni students will have graduated from high school in 2013 or 2014 and will have been students of one of the school districts during the last five years of their K-12 education.

Description of Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will participate in two interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes each. The first interview will focus on your experience and life history as it relates to the school districts being studied. In the follow-up interview, you will be asked to reflect on your school consolidation experiences. Interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. A full list of the interview questions will be shared with you at the time of the first interview. Types/nature of questions to be asked during interviews include:
Interview Questions

**Interview I: Context of participants’ experience and life history / Reconstruct details of their experiences. Sample questions include:**
- What is your involvement with the school’s consolidation process?
- How would you describe yourself (personally) during the school consolidation process?
- How was the symbolic identity (traditions of the community) of the school addressed as consolidation was considered?
- What caused local stakeholders to resist or support consolidation?

**Interview II: Participants reflect on meaning of their experience**
- Was the right decision made about school consolidation? Why or why not?
- What advice would you give to others considering school consolidation?

**Exit question:**
2. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

No names of participants will be used. It is important to note position of participants may be used in recruitment, data collection, analysis and reporting but that will be only identifying quality. Quotations by individuals may be used in the data collection, analysis and reporting. The individual will not be named (pseudonyms may be attached to quotations) but participants may be identified by position (community member or school board member or superintendent or alumni student). Gender-neutral pseudonyms will be used for any quotations. Participants may recognize themselves or others in written reports. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Forseeable discomfort or risk to participants has been addressed by the following efforts:

Participants will have the opportunity to decide whether they would like any of their responses to be anonymous.

From the outset of the study, respondents will be well-informed of both what the study will require of them and how their responses, and the data more broadly, is going to be used and distributed.

Informed consent will be an ongoing process and is not something that takes place solely at the start of the study and prior to the first interview. The informed consent form will be reviewed with the participants at the beginning of the second interview and at the end of the second interview.

The participant may request specific information may be strictly anonymous and this request will be added to the informed consent form with dates and signatures of the participant and principal investigator.

The principal investigator will avoid releasing as much demographic information as possible.
**Benefits**
The study’s primary significance is its value to educational administrators and governing board members involved in rural school district consolidation. The study makes it possible for rural school district officials to more clearly and concisely determine the importance of the school identity issue in the rural school consolidation process or consideration. Such knowledge should prove beneficial for future decision-making purposes.

However, it cannot be guaranteed that you will personally experience benefits from participating in this study. It is hoped that the information gained in this study may benefit society in the future.

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. Interviews will take place in private meeting room area within a public school building that is handicapped accessible. All participants will be able to participate as desired to any of the questions asked. The interviewer will accept any and all responses. The environment will be nonjudgmental and welcoming.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

No names of participants will be used. Quotes from participants may be used. Gender-neutral pseudonyms will be used for any quotations. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, **IRB@iastate.edu**, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

**Confidentiality**
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. Gender neutral pseudonyms will be used for any quotations.

Interviews will be recorded. Documents obtained during the interviews will be kept secure using Cybox - the university controlled system - on a password-protected account, accessible only by the principal investigator and Dr. Constance Beecher. Documents obtained during the interviews will be kept secure using Cybox. Messages regarding the research will not be left on answering machines. Messages regarding the research will not be left on answering machines or included within emails. Collected data will be stored using Cybox as able. If there are materials beyond what is placed on Cybox, access to the secure data will be permitted by the principal investigator only, by key to the locked file carrier kept at the home of the principal investigator.

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, contact Sue Burrack at 563-425-5982 or **burracks@uiu.edu**.
Supervising faculty member’s name and contact information: Dr. Constance Beecher, 
cbeecher@iastate.edu, 515-294-4512

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has
been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your
questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed
consent prior to your participation in the study.

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the
research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my
satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant’s Name (printed) ______________________________________________________

__________________________________________  ________________________________
Participant’s Signature                          Date

1. Information reviewed at beginning of second interview. Signed and dated by participant
   and principal investigator.____________________________________________________

2. Information reviewed at end of second interview. Signed and dated by participant and
   principal investigator.
   __________________________________________________________________________

3. Request for information to remain
   anonymous:______________________________________________________________